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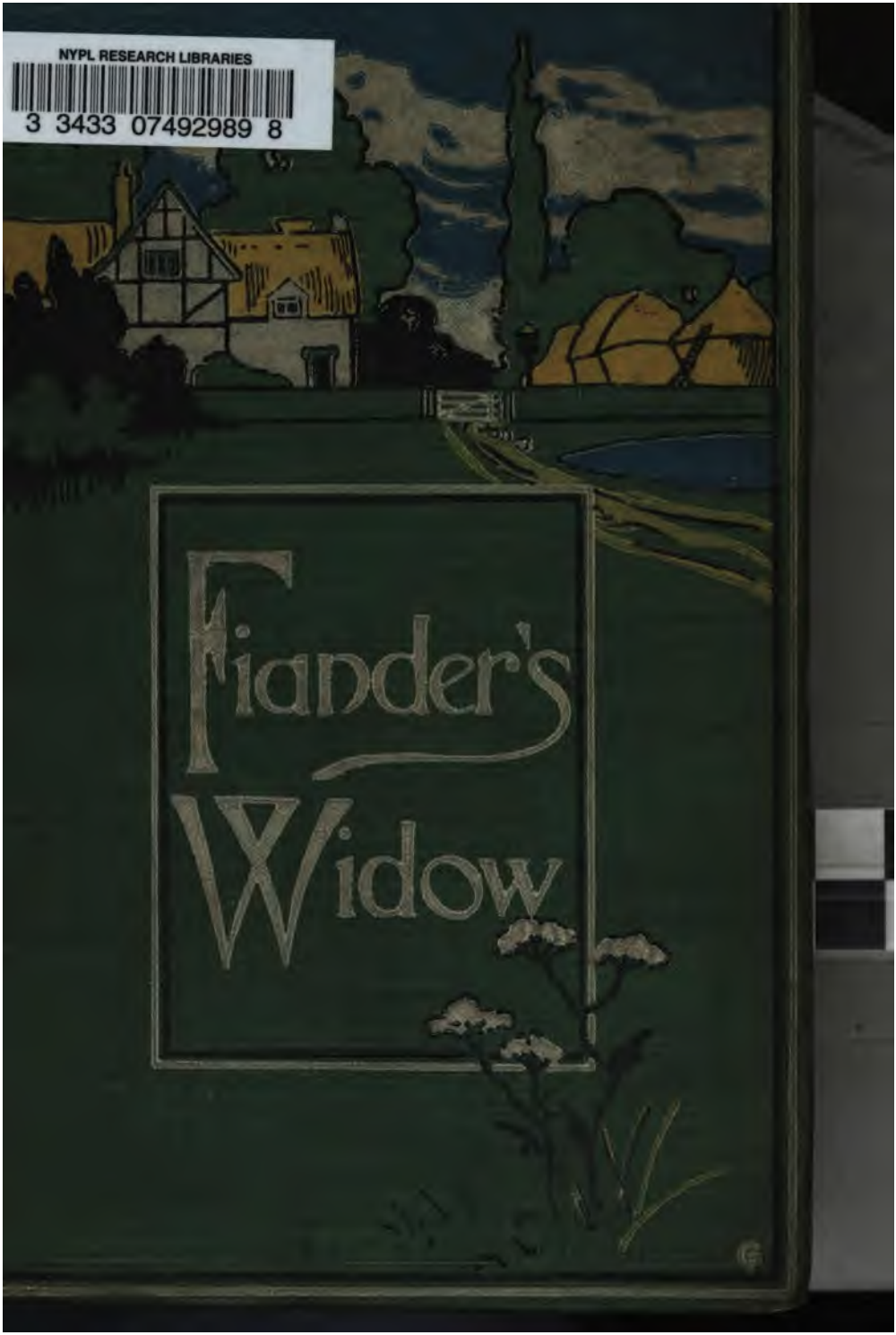

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FIANDER'S WIDOW

FIANDER'S WIDOW

A Novel

BY

~~M. E. FRANCIS~~

(MRS. FRANCIS BLUNDELL)

Author of "Pastorals of Dorset," "The Duenna of a Genius," etc., etc.

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I dedicate this Rural Romance

to

MY KIND HOSTESSES OF TENANTREES

True Daughters of "Dorset Dear,"

Under whose auspices I first became acquainted
with the peculiarities of its dialect and
the humours of its people

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FIANDER'S WIDOW

PROLOGUE

THE BRIDE

A man of reverend age,
But stout and hale. . . .

WORDSWORTH.

A wife's be the cheapest ov hands.

WILLIAM BARNES.

THE sale was over: live stock, implements, corn and hay, turnips and potatoes, even apples, had duly been entered to their various buyers; and now such smaller articles as milk-pails, cheese-tubs, cream-tins, weights and scales, and other items of a dairy-farmer's gear were passing under the hammer. The auction had been well attended, for it had been known beforehand that things would go cheap, and though the melancholy circumstances under which the sale took place called forth many expressions of regret and compassion, they in no way lessened the general eagerness to secure good bargains.

Old Giles Stelling had always kept pace with the times, and had been among the first to adopt new appliances and avail himself of the lights which advancing science throws even upon the avocations of the farmer. He had gone a little too fast, as his neighbours now agreed with many doleful 'ah's' and 'ayes' and shakings of heads. All these grand new machines of his had helped to precipitate the catastrophe which had overtaken him — a catastrophe which was tragic indeed, for the old farmer, overcome by the prospect of impending ruin, had been carried off by an apoplectic fit even before this enforced sale of his effects.

Nevertheless, though many considered these strange new-fangled reapers-and-binders, these unnatural-looking double-ploughs, a kind of flying in the face of Providence, a few spirited individuals had made up their minds to bid for them, and one energetic purchaser had even driven eighteen miles from the other side of the county to secure one particularly complicated machine.

The bidding was still proceeding briskly in the great barn when this person shouldered his way through the crowd and made a tour of inspection of the premises, previous to set-

ting forth again on his return journey. He was a middle-sized elderly man, with bright blue eyes that looked forth kindly if keenly from beneath bushy grizzled brows; the ruddy face, set off by a fringe of white beard and whisker, looked good-humoured and prosperous enough, but the somewhat stooping shoulders bore witness to the constant and arduous labour which had been Elias Fiander's lot in early life.

He sauntered across the great yard, so desolate to-day albeit crowded at the upper end nearest the barn; the suspension of the ordinary life of the place gave it an air of supreme melancholy and even loneliness. The cattle thrusting at each other in their enclosures and bellowing dismally, the sheep hurdled off in convenient lots, the very fowl penned up and squawking lamentably, for the more valuable specimens were tied together in bunches by the legs—all these dumb things seemed to have a kind of instinctive understanding that something unusual and tragic was going forward.

'Poor beasts, they do make a deal o' noise,' muttered Elias half aloud; 'a body might think they was a-cryin' for their master. Well, well, 't is an ill wind what blows nobody

good, and that there turnip-hoer was a wonderful bargain. It won't do him no harm as I should ha' picked it up so cheap. Nay, nay, 't won't do him no harm where he be gone to; and I might as well ha' bought it as another.'

Having satisfied a passing twinge of conscience with this reflection, he stepped into the great rickyard, and stood a moment gazing from one to the other of the golden and russet stacks.

'Prime stuff!' he muttered to himself. 'That be real old hay in the corner, and this here wheat-rick — there's a goodish lot o' money in that or I 'm much mistaken. Here be another, half thrashed — ah, fine stuff. 'T is a pity the poor old master did n't live to see the end o' that job — though if the money were n't a-goin' into his own pocket he would n't ha' been much the better for 't.'

He was wandering round the rick in question, gazing at it from every point, and even thrusting his hands upwards into the loosened sheaves of that portion which had been unroofed and partially thrashed, when a sudden rustle close to him made him start.

Lo! perched high upon the ledge of the half-demolished stack a figure was standing,

knee-deep among the roughly piled-up sheaves, the tall and shapely figure of a young girl. She was dressed in black, and from under the wide sombre brim of her straw hat a pair of blue eyes looked down fiercely at the farmer. The face in which they were set was oval in shape, and at that moment very pale; the lips were parted, showing a gleam of white teeth.

'Why, my dear,' said Fiander, stepping a little further away from the stack and gazing up at her in mild astonishment — 'why, whatever might you be doin' up there? You did gi' me quite a start, I do assure ye.'

'I 'm looking at something I don't like to see,' returned the girl in a choked voice; and her bosom heaved with a quick angry sob.

'Ah!' said the other tentatively. Setting his hat a little further back on his head and wrinkling up his eyes he examined her more closely. The black dress, the wrathful, miserable face told their own tale. 'I do 'low ye be somebody belongin' to the poor old master?' he continued respectfully.

She sobbed again for all response.

'Ah!' said Fiander again, with a world of sympathy in his blue eyes, ''t is a melancholy sight for ye, sure. You 're Mr. Stelling's daughter very like.'

'Granddaughter,' corrected the girl.

'Dear heart alive, 't is sad —'t is very sad for ye, miss, but I 'm sure I 'd never keep a-standin' on the stack frettin' yourself so, I would n't, truly. 'T is a very sad business altogether, Miss Stelling, but you 'll be upsettin' yourself worse if ye bide here.'

The girl stepped across the sheaves and drew near the edge of the stack. Fiander stretched out his hand to assist her down.

'That 's it,' he remarked encouragingly; 'I 'm main glad to see you are so sensible and ready to take advice, Miss Stelling. Here, let me help ye down.'

'No, thank you,' she replied, 'and my name is n't Stelling!'

Stooping, and supporting herself with one hand against the edge of the ledge, she swung herself gracefully down, her hat dropping off as she did so; the face thus exposed to view proved even younger than Fiander had anticipated, and, were he a more impressionable man, he might well have been startled at its beauty.

Even though he had attained the respectable age of fifty-eight and had not long buried a most faithful and hard-working helpmate, the worthy farmer was conscious of a glow of

admiration. Though the girl's eyes were blue, the hair and brows were distinctly dark, and the complexion of the brunette order — a combination somewhat unusual and very striking. Her figure was, as has been said, tall and slight, yet with vigour as well as grace in every movement: she alighted on the ground as easily and as lightly as though she had been a bird.

'Well done!' ejaculated Fiander. 'And what might your name be if it bain't Stelling?'

'My name is Goldring,' she replied a little haughtily. 'Rosalie Goldring. My mother was Mr. Stelling's daughter.'

'Well now,' returned the farmer, smiling cheerfully, 'Goldring! and that's a pretty name too — partic'lar for a maid — a token I might say! Rosalie did you tell me, miss? I do mind a song as I used to hear when I were a boy about Rosalie the Prairie Flower.' She had picked up her hat and stood gazing at him discontentedly.

'I suppose everything is sold by this time?' she said. 'My dear grandfather's mare, and the trap, and even my cocks and hens. Dear grandfather! he always used to tell me that everything in the whole place was to be mine

when he died — and now they won't so much as leave me the old rooster.'

'Poor maid!' ejaculated Fiander, full of commiseration, and guiltily conscious of having bought that turnip-hoer a bargain. ''T is unfort'nate for ye, I 'm sure. Did n't your grandfather make no provision for ee?'

'Oh, it is n't that I mind,' retorted Rosalie quickly; 'it 's seeing everything go. Everything that I love — all the live things that I knew and used to take care of — even my churn, and my cheese-presses — granfer used always to say I was wonderful about cheese-making — and the pails and pans out of my dairy — everything that I kept so nice and took such pride in. They 'll all go to strangers now — all scattered about, one here, one there. And to-morrow they 'll be selling the things out of the house. If they leave me the clothes I stand up in that 'll be all.'

She sobbed so pitifully and looked so forlorn that Fiander's heart was positively wrung.

'My word!' he ejaculated, 'I do 'low it 's hard — 't is that, 'tis cruel hard; what was ye thinkin' o' doin', my dear? You 'll have some relations most like as 'll be glad to take ye in?'

'I have n't a relation in the world,' returned

Rosalie with another sob; 'I had nobody but grandfather. If I had,' she added quickly, 'I don't know that I should have gone to them — I don't like to be beholden to anybody. I 'll earn my own bread, though I don't know how I shall do it; grandfather could never bear the notion of my going to service.'

'Ah! and could n't he?' returned Fiander, deeply interested.

'No, indeed. Of course when he was alive we never thought of things coming to this pass. He always told me I should be mistress here when he was gone, and that I should be well off. Dear granfer, he grudged me nothing.'

'Such a good education as he gi'ed ye too!' observed Elias commiseratingly.

'Oh, yes. I was at boarding-school for three years. I can play the piano and work the crewel-work, and I learnt French.'

'Dear heart alive!' groaned Fiander, 'and now ye be a-thrown upon the world. But I was meanin' another kind of education. Cheese-making and dairy-work and that — you was sayin' you was a good hand at such-like.' While he spoke he eyed her sharply, and listened eagerly for the response.

'Yes, yes,' agreed Rosalie, 'I can do all

that. We made all kinds of cheeses every day in the winter, "Ramil," and "Ha'skim," and "Blue Vinny" and all. Yes, I was kept busy — my butter always took top price in the market; and then there were the accounts to make up of an evening. My life was n't all play, I can tell you, but I was very happy.'

'My missus,' remarked Fiander, following out his own train of thoughts — 'that 's the second one: I buried her a year come Michaelmas — she was a wonderful hand at the Ha'skim cheeses. A very stirring body she was! I do miss her dreadful; and these here dairy-women as ye hire they be terrible folk for waste — terrible! I reckon I 'll be a lot out of pocket this year.'

'We all have our troubles, you see,' said Rosalie, with tears still hanging on her black lashes. 'Well, I thank you for your kind words, sir; they seem to have done me good. I think I 'll go in, now. I don't want to meet any of the folk.'

'Bide a bit, my dear,' said the farmer, 'bide a bit! I 've summat to ax ye. You bain't thinkin' of going to service, ye say, and ye don't rightly know where to look for a home?'

Rosalie stared at him. He was laughing in

a confused, awkward way, and his face was growing redder and redder. Before she could answer he went on:

'There 's your name now — it be a pretty 'un. I do 'low it 'ud seem almost a pity to change it, an' yet if ye was to lose the name ye might get the thing.'

'I don't understand you, sir,' cried she, growing red in her turn.

'Why, Goldring, you know. 'T is a token, as I said jist now. If you was to get married you would n't be Goldring no more, and yet ye 'd be getting a Gold Ring, d' ye see — a weddin'-ring!'

'Oh,' said Rosalie distantly.

'If I might make so bold as to ax, have ye been a-keepin' company wi' any young man, miss?'

'No,' she returned, 'I don't care for young men.'

'Well done,' cried Fiander excitedly, 'well done, my dear! That shows your spirit. Come, what 'ud ye say to an old one?'

His blue eyes were nearly jumping out of his head, his honest face was all puckered into smiles.

'Come,' he cried, ''t is an offer! Here be I, an old one, yet not so very old neither,

and uncommon tough. I wants a missus terrible bad. I 've a-been on the look-out for one this half-year, but I did n't expect to take up with a leading article like you. Well, and ye be lookin' for a home, and ye bain't a-keepin' company wi' nobody. I 'd make ye so comfortable as ever I could. I 'd not grudge ye nothing, no more than your grandfather. I 've a-worked hard all my life and I 've got together a nice bit o' money, and bought my farm. There 's seventy head of milch cows on it now, not to speak o' young beasts and pigs and that. Ye might be missus there, and make so many cheeses as ever ye pleased. How old might ye be, my maid ? '

'Eighteen,' returned Rosalie tremulously; she had been gazing at him with large startled eyes, but had made no attempt to interrupt him.

'Eighteen! Well, and I 'm fifty-eight. There 's forty years a-tween us, but, Lord, what 's forty years? I can mind when I were eighteen year of age the same as if 't were yesterday, and I can mind as I did think myself as old and as wise as I be now. Come, my dear, what 's forty year ? I 'm hale and hearty, and I 'd be so good to ye as ever I could; and you be lonesome and desolate — thrown upon the

world, as I say. Come, let's make it up together comfortable. Say the word, and ye can snap your fingers at anyone who interferes wi' ye. My place is just so big as this — bigger. Well, now, is it a bargain?'

'I think it is,' murmured Rosalie. 'I — I don't know what else to do, and I think you look kind.'

. . . . . .

Late on that same evening Mr. Fiander reached home; and after attending to his horse and casting a cursory glance round to ascertain that nothing had gone wrong in his absence, he betook himself across the fields to the house of his next neighbour and great crony, Isaac Sharpe.

He found his friend seated in the armchair by the chimney corner. Isaac, being a bachelor-man, paid small heed to the refinements which were recently beginning to be in vogue among his class, and habitually sat in the kitchen. The old woman who acted as housekeeper to him had gone home, and he was alone in the wide, flagged room, which looked cheerful enough just now, lit up as it was by the wood fire, which danced gaily on the yellow walls, and threw gigantic shadows of the hams and flitches suspended from the

great oaken beams, on the ceiling. He was just in the act of shaking out the ashes from his pipe, previous to retiring for the night, when Elias entered and greeted him with no small astonishment.

'Be it you, 'Lias? I were just a-goin' to lock up and go to roost.'

Elias creaked noisily across the great kitchen, and, standing opposite Sharpe in the chimney corner, looked down at him for a moment without speaking. The other tapped his pipe on the iron hob nearest him and continued to gaze interrogatively at the newcomer. He was about the same age as Fiander but looked younger, his burly form being straight and his sunburnt face more lightly touched by the hand of time. Hair, beard, and whiskers, alike abundant, were of a uniform pepper-and-salt — there being more pepper than salt in the mixture; when he smiled he displayed a set of teeth in no less excellent preservation.

As Elias continued to gaze down at him with an odd sheepish expression, and without speaking, he himself took the initiative.

'Ye called round to tell me about the sale, I suppose? Well, I take it very kind of ye, 'Lias, though I was n't for your goin' after

that new-fangled machine. I do 'low ye 'll ha' give a big price for 't.'

His tone had a tinge of severity, and it was noticeable throughout that his attitude towards Fiander was somewhat dictatorial, though in truth Fiander was the older as well as the richer man.

'Nay now, nay now,' the latter returned quickly, 'ye be wrong for once, Isaac. 'T is a wonderful bargain: things was goin' oncommon cheap. There was hurdles to be picked up for next to nothin'. I were a-thinkin' of you, Isaac, and a-wishin' ye 'd ha' comed wi' me. Yes, hurdles was goin' wonderful cheap. They 'd ha' come in handy for your sheep.'

Isaac grunted; since he had not thought fit to accompany his friend, he was rather annoyed at being told of the bargains he had missed.

'It was a long way to travel,' he remarked. 'Did you have to go into Dorchester?'

'Nay I turned off by Yellowham Hill. Banford's about four mile out o' Dorchester, and I cut off a good bit that way.'

'Well, ye 've a-got the hoer,' grunted Isaac. 'Did you bid for anything else?'

'No, I didn't bid for it,' returned Elias with

a sheepish chuckle; 'but I 've a-met with a wonderful piece of luck out yonder.'

He paused, slowly rubbed his hands, chuckled again, and, finally bending down so that his face was on a level with Sharpe's, said slowly and emphatically:

'Isaac, you 'll be a-hearing summat on Sunday as 'ull surprise ye.'

Isaac, who from force of habit had replaced his empty pipe in his mouth, now took it out, gaped at his interlocutor for a full half-minute, and finally said:

'What be I a-goin' to hear o' Sunday?'

'Banns! My banns,' announced Fiander, triumphant, but shamefaced too.

'What!' ejaculated Isaac, in a tone of immeasurable disgust. 'Ye be at it again, be ye? I never did see sich a man for wedlock. Why, this here 'ull make the third of 'em.'

'Come,' returned Elias plaintively, 'that 's none of my fault. My missuses don't last — that 's where 't is. I did think the last 'un 'ud ha' done my time, but she goes an' drops off just at our busiest season. If I be so much o' a marryin' man, 't is because the Lord in His mystreerious ways has seen fit to deal hardly wi' I. Ye know as well as me, don't

ye, Isaac, as a dairy-farmer can't get on nohow wi'out a wife.'

'Aye, 't is what I've always said,' agreed Isaac. 'There may be profit in the dairy-farming, but there's a deal o' risk. What wi' cows dyin', and bein' forced to toll a woman about, 't is more bother nor it's worth. Why didn't ye do same as me, and keep sheep and grow roots? Ah, what with roots, and what with corn, a man can get on as well that way as your way — and there's less risk.'

'Well, I've a-been brought up to it, d'ye see, Isaac — that's it. My father was a dairyman before me — in a less way, to be sure. Ah, it were a struggle for him, I tell ye. He did ha' to pay thirteen pound for every cow he rented of old Meatyard, what was master then. Thirteen pound! Think of that. Why, I used to hear him say as pounds and pounds went through his hands before he could count as he 'd made a penny.'

'Ah!' remarked Mr. Sharpe, with the placid interest of one who hears an oft-told tale. 'But then pastures and house-rent and all were counted in that — your father paid no rent for 'em, did he? And Meatyard found him in cows, and kept him in hay and oil-cake and that?'

'Yes,' agreed Elias unwillingly; for the enumeration of these extenuating circumstances detracted from the picturesque aspect of the case. 'Oh, yes, he did that, but my father he al'ays said it were a poor way o' makin' a livin'. "Save up, 'Lias, my boy," he al'ays did use to say to I. "Save up and buy a bit o' land for yourself." So I scraped and scrimped and laid by; and my first missus, she were a very thrifty body, a very thrifty body she were. She put her shoulder to the wheel too, and when old Meatyard died we bought the farm, and things did prosper wi' us very well since — till my last poor wife died; then all did go wrong wi' I. Aye, as I say, if I do seem more set on matrimony than other folks, 't is because the Lord ha' marked I out for 't. Now you, Isaac, never was called that way, seemingly.'

'Nay,' agreed Isaac, 'I never were a-called that way. I never could do wi' women-folk about. I 've seed too much of 'em when I were a young 'un. Lord, what a cat-and-dog life my poor father and mother did lead, to be sure! He liked a drop o' drink, my father did; and when he 'd had a glass too much I 've seen my mother pull the hair out of his head by handfuls — ah, that I have. But father, he 'd

never complain. Soon as she 'd leave go of him he 'd stoop down and pick up all the hair as she 'd a-pulled out of his head. He 'd put it in a box — ah, many 's the time he 've a-showed it to me arter him and her had had a fallin' out, and he 'd say to me, "Never you go fur to get married, my boy," and I 'd say, "Nay, father," and I 've a-kept my word.'

'Your poor sister kep' house for you a good bit, though, did n't she, after she lost her husband? And you were uncommon fond o' the boy.'

'Yes, it be different wi' a sister — particularly one as knows she have n't got no right to be there. She were a very quiet body, poor Eliza were. I were quite sorry when she and the little chap shifted to Dorchester; but she thought she 'd do better in business.'

'Well, but you were a good friend to she,' remarked Elias, 'both to she and her boy. Ye paid his passage to 'Merica arter she died, poor thing, did n't ye?'

'Ah, I did pay his passage to 'Merica, and I did gi' him a bit o' money in hand to start wi', out there. Well, but you ha' n't told me the name o' your new missus.'

'Rosalie Goldring is her name,' returned Elias, lowering his voice confidentially. 'Ro-

salie Goldring — nice name, bain't it? Soon 's I heard her name I took it for a kind o' token.'

'Ah! there be a good many Goldrings Dorchester side,' remarked Isaac. 'Was that what took you off so far away? You 've been a-coortin' and never dropped a hint o' it.'

'Nay now, I never so much as set eyes on her till this very day. But being so bad off for a wife, and so put about wi' all the waste as is a-goin' on at my place, I thought I 'd make sure o' her, so I axed her. And she were glad enough to take me — she 's Giles Stelling's granddaughter, d' ye see, and she has to turn out now.'

'Old Stelling's granddaughter,' repeated Isaac with emphasis. 'Granddaughter? He must ha' been a terrible old man.'

'I do 'low he were — old enough,' replied Elias hastily. 'Well, now I 've a-told ye the news, Isaac, I think I might as well take myself home again. My head be all in a whirl wi' so much travellin' and one thing and another. Good-night to ye, Isaac; ye must be sure an' come over to see the new turnip-hoer to-morrow.'

A little more than three weeks later Fiander brought home his bride, and Isaac Sharpe cleaned himself, and strolled up in the even-

ing to congratulate the couple. Elias admitted him, his face wreathed with smiles, and his whole person smartened up and rejuvenated.

'Come in, Isaac, come in. The wife 's gone upstairs to get ready for supper, but she 'll be down in a minute.'

'I give you joy,' said Sharpe gruffly.

'Thank'ee, Isaac, thank'ee. Come in and take a chair. Ye may fill your pipe too—she does n't object to a pipe.'

'*Who* does n't object to a pipe?' said Isaac staring, with a great hand on each knee.

'Why, Mrs. Fiander does n't. Oh, Isaac, I be a-favoured so. I told you the A'mighty had marked me out for wedlock; well, I can truly say that this here missus promises to be the best o' the three. Wait till ye see her, and you 'll think I 'm in luck.'

Isaac gazed at him with a kind of stolid compassion, shook his head, deliberately filled his pipe, and fell to smoking. Elias did the same, and after he had puffed for a moment or two broke silence.

'Ah! ye 'll find her most agree'ble. I did mention to her that you be used to drop in of a Sunday, and she did make no objections—no objections at all.'

'Did n't she?' returned Isaac. 'Come,

that 's a good thing.' He paused for a moment, the veins in his forehead swelling. 'I don't know but if she had made objections I should n't ha' come all the same,' he continued presently. 'I 've a-come here Sunday arter Sunday for twenty year and more. It would n't seem very natural to stop away now.'

'Nay, sure,' agreed Fiander nervously; 't would n't seem at all natural.'

The sound of a light foot was now heard crossing the room overhead and descending the stairs.

'That be her,' remarked Elias excitedly.

The door opened, and a tall well-formed figure stood outlined against the background of fire-lit kitchen. It was almost dusk in the parlour where the two men sat.

'Why, you're all in the dark here!' observed a cheerful voice. 'Shall I light the lamp, Elias?'

'Do, my dear, do. This here be Mr. Isaac Sharpe, our next neighbour, as you 've a-heard me talk on often. Isaac, here 's Mrs. Fiander.'

Isaac wedged his pipe firmly into the corner of his mouth, and extended a large hand; according to the code of manners prevalent

in that neighbourhood, it was not considered necessary to rise when you greeted a lady.

'How d' ye do, mum? I give you joy,' he remarked.

When her hand was released Mrs. Fiander sought and found lamp and matches, and removed the shade and chimney, always with such quick decided movements that Isaac remarked to himself approvingly that she was n't very slack about her work. She struck a match, bending over the lamp, and suddenly the light flared up. Isaac leaned forward in his favourite attitude, a hand on either knee, and took a good look at the newcomer; then drawing himself back, and removing his pipe from his mouth, he shot an indignant glance at Fiander.

'Come, that looks more cheerful,' remarked the unconscious bride; 'and supper will be ready in a minute. I 'll go and get the cloth.'

As she vanished the new-made husband bent over anxiously to his friend.

'What do you think of her?' he remarked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

'Elias,' returned his friend wrathfully and reproachfully, 'I did n't expect it of ye; no, that I did n't. At your time of life and arter

buryin' two of 'em! Nay now, I did n't think it of you. The least you might do was to pick out a staid woman.'

'Come, come,' retorted Fiander; 'she's young, but that'll wear off, Isaac — she'll mend in time.'

'It bain't only that she be young,' resumed Sharpe, still severe and indignant. 'But I do think, 'Lias, takin' everything into consideration, that it 'ud ha' been more natural and more decent, I might say, for you to ha' got married to somebody more suited to ye. Why, man, your new missus be a regular beauty!'

PART I

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

PART I

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

CHAPTER I

Oh, Sir! the good die first . . .

WORDSWORTH.

Aa! Nichol's now laid in his grave,
Bi t' side of his fadder and mudder;
The warl not frae deoth could yen save,
We a' gang off, — teane after t' other.

A CUMBERLAND BALLAD.

SUNDAY noontide; and a warm Sunday too. The little congregation pouring out of the ivy-grown church in the hollow seemed to have found the heat within oppressive; the men were wiping their moist brows previous to assuming the hard uncompromising hats which alone could do justice to the day, and the women fanned themselves with their clean white handkerchiefs, or sniffed ostentatiously at the squat, oddly shaped bottles of smelling-salts, or nosegays of jessamine and southernwood, with which they had provided themselves. In the village

proper sundry non-churchgoers waited the return of their more pious brethren; one or two lads sat expectantly on stiles, on the look-out for their respective sweethearts, whom they would escort homewards, and with whom they would possibly make appointments for a stroll at some later hour of the day. Children, with important faces, might be seen returning from the bakehouse, carefully carrying the Sunday dinner covered with a clean cloth; and a few older men and women stood about their doorsteps, or leaned over their garden gates, with the intention of waylaying their homeward-bound neighbours and extracting from them items concerning a very important event which had recently taken place in the vicinity.

One very fat old lady, propping herself with difficulty against the lintel of her door, hailed her opposite neighbour eagerly.

'Good-day, Mrs. Paddock. Did ye chance to notice if master have a-gone by yet?'

'Nay, he have n't a-come this way — not so far as I know,' returned the other. 'They do say he takes on terrible about poor Mr. Fiander.'

'Ah!' said the first speaker with a long-drawn breath, 'he 'd be like to, I do 'low,

seein' what friends they was. Folks d' say as Fiander have very like left him summat.'

'Nay, nay, he 'll leave it all in a lump to she. He thought the world of the missus. He 'll be sure to ha' left it to she — wi'out she marries again. Then — well, then, very like Mr. Sharpe will come in. Poor Mr. Fiander, 't is a sad thing to ha' never chick nor child to leave your money to.'

'Ah, sure, 't is a pity they did n't have no children. I reckon Mr. Fiander looked to have 'em, seein' he 'd picked out such a fine shapely maid. He were a fine man too, though he were gettin' into years, to be sure, when he wed her. Not but what a body 'ud ha' expected the old gentleman to last a good bit longer. Sixty-two they d' say he were.'

'Well, and that 's no age to speak on! Lord, I were that upset when I heerd he were took I 'm not the better of it yet.'

'Ay, 't is a terrible visitation! All as has hearts must feel it.'

'I do assure ye, Mrs. Belbin, I 've scarce closed my eyes since, and when I do drop off towards mornin' I do dream — 't is fearful what I do dream! This very night, I tell ye, I thought the End had come, and we was all a-bein' judged yon in church. The Lord

A'mighty Hisself was a-sittin' up in gallery a-judging of we ——'

'Bless me,' interrupted Mrs. Belbin, 'and what were A'mighty God like to look on, Mrs. Paddock?'

'Oh, He were beautiful — wi' broad large features and a very piercin' eye — but He had a beautiful smile. I thought, if ye can understand, that some was a-goin' up to the right and some to the left. Yes, we was all bein' judged, taking our turns. Squire fust, and then his lady, and then all the young ladies and gentlemen a-goin' up one after t' other and a-bein' judged ——'

'Well, well!' commented Mrs. Belbin, throwing up her eyes and hands. 'All so natural like, wa' n't it?'

She had evidently been much impressed by the strict order of precedence observed by the actors in this visionary drama.

'Well, then I seed farmers a-goin' up ——'

'Did ye see poor Farmer Fiander?' inquired the other eagerly.

'Nay, nay. He were n't there, strange to say. 'T 'ud ha' been natural to see him — him bein' dead, ye know — but he were n't there. But I see master a-bein' judged.'

'Did ye, now? and where did he go?

He 's a good man — he 'd be like to go up'ards. Were Hamworthy there — the butcher, I mean? I wonder what the A'mighty 'ud say to the short weights that he do give us poor folk!'

'Nay, I did n't see him, fur it were a-comin' nigh my turn, and I were that a-feared I could n't think o' nothin' else. And when I did get up to walk up under gallery I thought my legs did give way and down I plumped — and that did awaken me up.'

'Well, it was a wonderful dream, Mrs. Paddock. I 'm not surprised as you be feelin' a bit poorly to-day. 'T is astonishing what folks d' dream when they 're upset. I do assure ye when my stummick's a bit out of order I 'm hag-rid all night. Last Sunday 't was, I did dream I seed a great big toad sittin' on piller, and I hollered out and hit at him, and Belbin he cotched me by the hand, "Good gracious!" says he, "what be'st thumpin' me like that for?" "Why," says I, "bain't there a toad on piller?" "Nay now," says he, "there 's nothin' at all; but you 've a-hit me sich a crack upon the chops that I 'll lay I 'll have the toothache for a week."'

'I 'd never go for to say as dreams did n't mean summat, though,' said Mrs. Paddock.

'Aye, I've great faith in dreams and tokens and sich. Ye mind old Maria Gillingham? Folks always used to think her a bit of a witch, but she never did nobody much harm seemingly. It were but the day before she died as I did meet her. "You look poorly, Maria," says I. "I be like to be poorly, Mrs. Paddock," says she. "I'm near my end," she says. "I've had a token." "You don't tell me?" says I. "Yes," she said. "I were a-sittin' in chimbly corner just now, and three great blue-bottles did come flyin' in wi' crape upon their wings, and they did fly three times round my head, and they did say, *Soon gone! Soon gone! Soon gone!*"'

'Ah,' commented Mrs. Belbin, 'and she were soon gone, were n't she?'

'She were,' agreed Mrs. Paddock lugubriously. 'They did find her lyin' wi' her head under the table next day, stone dead. . . . But here's Rose Bundy a-comin' down the road. Well, Rose, was the widow in church?'

'Ay, I seed her,' cried Rose, a fat red-cheeked girl, with round black eyes at this moment gleaming with excitement. 'She did have on such lovely weeds — ye never saw such weeds. There was crape on 'em very

nigh all over. She did have a great long fall as did come to her knees very near, and another much the same a-hanging down at the back o' her bonnet, and her skirt was covered with crape — and I think there was truly more black than white to her han'kercher. Ah, it was a-goin' all the time under her veil — fust her eyes and then her nose. Poor thing! she do seem to feel her loss dreadful.'

'And well she may,' said Mrs. Paddock emphatically. 'A good husband same as Fiander bain't to be picked up every day.'

'Why, he was but a old man,' retorted the girl. 'Mrs. Fiander 'll soon have plenty o' young chaps a-comin' to coort her; they d' say as Mr. Fiander have a-left her every single penny he had, to do what she likes wi'! She 'll soon take up wi' some smart young fellow — it is n't in natur' to expect a handsome young body same as her to go on frettin' for ever after a old man, let him be so good as he may.'

'Nay now, nay now,' cried Mrs. Belbin authoritatively, ''t will be this way, as you 'll soon see. Mr. Fiander will ha' left the widow his money and farm and all, as long as she do be a widow, but if she goes for to change her state, why then o' coorse it 'll go to somebody

else. There never was a man livin'—and more particularly a old one—as could make up his mind to leave his money behind him for a woman to spend on another man. That 'll be it, ye 'll find. Mrs. Fiander 'll keep her money as long as she d' keep her mournin'.'

'Here be master, now,' announced her opposite neighbour, craning her head a little further out of the doorway. 'The poor man, he do look upset and sorrowful.'

The eyes of all the little party fixed themselves on the approaching figure. Mr. Sharpe was clad in Sunday gear of prosperous broadcloth, and wore, somewhat on the back of his head, a tall hat so antiquated as to shape and so shaggy as to texture that the material of which it was composed may possibly have been beaver. His large face was at that moment absolutely devoid of all expression; Mrs. Paddock's remark, therefore, seemed to be dictated by a somewhat lively imagination. He nodded absently as the women greeted him, which they did very respectfully, as both their husbands worked under him, but wheeled round after he had passed the group to address Mrs. Paddock.

'I 'll take those chicken off you as you was

a-speakin' on if you'll fetch 'em up to my place to-week. The fox have a-took a lot of mine, and I be loath to disappoint my customers.'

'I'll fetch 'em up, sir, so soon as I can. These be terrible times, Mr. Sharpe, bain't they? Sich losses as we've a-had last week! The fox he've a-been terrible mischeevous; and poor Mr. Fiander—he were took very unexpected, were n't he?'

'Ah!' agreed Mr. Sharpe.

'You'll be the one to miss him, sir. As we was sayin', Mrs. Belbin and me, Mr. Sharpe 'ull be the one to miss him. Ye did use to go there every Sunday reg'lar, Mr. Sharpe, did n't ye?'

'Ah!' agreed the farmer again. His large face seemed just as expressionless as before, but a close observer might have detected a sudden suffusion of colour to the eyelids.

'They d'say as Mrs. Fiander be takin' on terrible,' put in Mrs. Belbin, folding her arms across her ample bosom, and settling herself for a good chat with an air of melancholy enjoyment. 'She is a nice young woman—yes, she's that; and the marriage did turn out wonderful well, though folks did think it a bit foolish o' Mr. Fiander to choose sich a

young maid at his time o' life. But he was lonesome, poor man, losing his first wife so long ago, and the children dying so young, and his second missus bein' took too. But, well, as I d' say, the last marriage turned out wonderful well; there was never a word said again' Mrs. Fiander.'

'There was never a word *to* be said,' returned Mr. Sharpe somewhat sternly.

'Yes, just what I d' say,' chimed in Mrs. Paddock. 'His ch'ice was a good 'un. She be a nice body, Mrs. Fiander be.'

'Ah!' agreed the farmer, 'I d' 'low she be a nice plain young woman. Her husband have a-proved that he did think his ch'ice a good 'un, for he 've a-left her everything as he had in the world.'

'But not if she marries again, sir, sure?' cried both the women together.

'Lard,' added Mrs. Belbin, 'he'd never ha' been sich a sammy as to let her keep everything if she goes for to take another man.'

'She be left house and farm, stock and money, onconditional,' returned Mr. Sharpe emphatically. And he passed on, leaving the gossips aghast.

CHAPTER II

The time I 've lost in wooing,
In watching and pursuing
The light that lies
In woman's eyes,
Has been my heart's undoing.

THOMAS MOORE.

THE subject of the conversation recently recorded was slowly removing her 'blacks,' and laying them carefully away on the lavender-scented shelves in the desolate upper chamber of the home which had suddenly grown so lonely. Divested of the flowing mantle, the tall, well-moulded figure was set off by its close-fitting black robe; and the face, which had been hidden from view by the thick folds of crape, proved able to stand the test of the glaring summer sunshine. The adjective 'plain,' applied to the widow by her late husband's friend, must be taken only in its local sense as signifying 'simple and straightforward;' even to the indifferent eyes of this elderly yeoman Rosalie's beauty had ripened and increased during the four years that had elapsed since her marriage with his

friend. The black lashes which shaded her lovely eyes were still wet; the red lips quivered, and the bosom heaved convulsively. Most of the friends and neighbours of the late Mr. Fiander would have been astonished — not to say scandalised — at the sight of such grief. It was quite decent and becoming to cry in church where everybody was looking at you, but to cry when you were alone for an old man of sixty-two — when you had been left in undisputed possession of all his property, and might with perfect impunity marry again at the earliest possible opportunity — it was not only unreasonable and foolish, but rank ingratitude for the most merciful dispensation of Providence.

But Mrs. Fiander continued to sob to herself, and to look blankly round the empty room, and out at the wide fields where the familiar figure had been wont to roam; and when, taking the new widow's cap from its box, she arranged it on the top of her abundant hair, she could not repress a fresh gush of tears.

'Poor Fiander!' she said to herself, 'he would n't let me wear it if he knew. It makes me a perfect fright, and is so cumbersome and so much in the way. But I 'll wear it

all the same. Nobody shall say I 'm wanting in respect to his memory. Dear, dear, not a week gone yet! It seems more like a year.'

She descended the stairs slowly, and entered the parlour. There was the high-backed chair where Fiander used to sit waiting for the Sunday midday meal; there also was the stool on which he supported his gouty leg. Opposite was another chair, invariably occupied by Farmer Sharpe on Sunday afternoons, when, after a walk round his neighbour's land, he came in for a chat and a smoke. Mrs. Fiander herself had always sat at the table, joining in the conversation from time to time, after she had mixed for her husband and his friend the stiff glass of grog of which it was their custom to partake. Fiander said nobody mixed it so well as she, and even Mr. Sharpe occasionally nodded approval, and generously agreed that she was a first-rate hand.

She wondered idly if Mr. Sharpe would come to-day; she almost hoped he would. She did not like to walk round the fields alone — people would think it strange, too — and it was so lonely and so dreary sitting by herself in the house.

But Mr. Sharpe's chair remained empty all that afternoon; Mrs. Fiander, however, had

other visitors. It was getting near tea-time, and she was looking forward somewhat anxiously to the arrival of that meal which would make a break in the dismal hours, when a genteel knock at the door startled her. She knew it was not Isaac, for it was his custom to walk in uninvited, and thought it might be some other neighbour coming with a word of comfort. She was surprised, however, when the maid ushered in a tall, stout young man, whom she recognised as the son of one of the leading tradespeople in the town. Andrew Burge's father was, indeed, not only cab and coach proprietor on a large scale, but also undertaker, and Rosalie now remembered that her actual visitor had taken a prominent part at her husband's funeral.

'I jest called to see how you might be getting on, Mrs. Fiander,' he remarked, 'and to offer my respectful condoliences. 'T was a melancholy occasion where we met last, Mrs. Fiander.'

'It was indeed,' said Rosalie; adding, somewhat stiffly, 'Take a seat, Mr. Burge.'

Mr. Burge took a seat — not one of the ordinary chairs which Mrs. Fiander indicated with a general wave of the hand, but poor Elias's own particular one, which was, as has

been stated, established in the chimney-corner. It happened to be directly opposite to the one in which Rosalie had been sitting—Isaac Sharpe's usual chair — and was no doubt chosen by the visitor on account of its agreeable proximity to his hostess. Anybody more unlike its former occupant it would be hard to imagine. Andrew was, as has been said, tall and stout, with black eyes, closely resembling boot-buttons in size and expression, a florid complexion, and very sleek black hair. He conveyed a general impression of bursting out of his clothes; his coat appearing to be too tight, his trousers too short, his collar too high, and his hat, when he wore it, too small. This hat he carefully placed upon the ground between his legs, and drew from its crown a large white pocket-handkerchief, which he flourished almost in a professional manner.

'I feels,' he went on, attuning his voice to the melancholy tone in harmony with this proceeding — 'I feels that any condoliences, let them be so sincere as they may, falls immaterially short of the occasion. The late Mr. Elias Fiander was universally respected by the townsfolk of Branston as well as by his own immediate neighbours.'

'You are very kind,' said Rosalie, feeling that she must make a remark, and inwardly chiding herself for the frenzied impatience with which she had longed to turn him out of her husband's chair. After all, the poor young man was unconscious of offence, and meant well.

'It was, I may say, Mrs. Fiander, a object of congratulation to me that I was able to pay the deceased a last melancholy tribute. P'r'aps you did n't chance to observe that it was me druv the 'earse?'

'I knew I had seen you there,' said the widow, in a low voice, 'but I could n't for the moment recollect where.'

'It would ha' fallen in better wi' my own wishes,' went on Andrew, 'if I could ha' driven both o' you. But my father told me you did n't fancy the notion o' the Jubilee 'earse.'

'You mean that combined hearse and mourning coach?' cried Rosalie. 'No, indeed! Why, the coffin is put crosswise behind the driver's legs, just like a bale of goods. I think it 's dreadful!'

'Nay now,' returned Andrew, 'we are most careful to show every respect to the pore corpse. The compartment is made special — glazed, and all quite beautiful. Some people

thinks it a privilege for the mourners to be sittin' behind, so close to their dear departed. And then think of the expense it saves — only one pair of horses needed, you know! Not but what expense is no object to *you;* and of course, your feelin's bein' o' that delicate natur', you felt, I suppose, it would be almost too 'arrowing.'

'I know I could n't bear the idea,' she cried. 'The *Jubilee* hearse, do you call it? How came you to give it such a name?'

'Ah! Why, you see, it was entirely my father's idea, and he had it built in the Jubilee year. He thought, you know, he 'd like to do something a little special that year by way of showin' his loyalty. Ah, he spared no expense in carryin' of it out, I do assure 'ee. Well, as I was sayin', Mrs. Fiander, it would have been a great pleasure to me to have given you both a token of respect and sympathy at the same time, but, since it was n't to be, I followed what I thought would be most in accordance with your wishes, and I showed my respect for your feelin's by driving the remains.'

Here he flourished the handkerchief again and raised the boot-button eyes to Mrs. Fiander's face.

'I am, of course, grateful for any tribute of respect to my dear husband,' she said.

'Yes,' resumed Mr. Burge, 'I thought you'd look on it in that light; but I should have thought it a privilege to drive you, Mrs. Fiander.'

Rosalie made some inarticulate rejoinder.

'I thought I'd just call round and explain my motives,' he went on, 'and also take the opportunity of offering in person my best condoliences.'

'Thank you,' said Rosalie.

'I may speak, I think,' remarked Andrew pompously, 'in the name of the whole borough of Branston. There was, I might say, but one mournful murmur when the noos of his death came to town. But one mournful murmur, I do assure 'ee, Mrs. Fiander.'

Rosalie looked up gratefully; the young man certainly meant well and this information was gratifying. She felt a little thrill of melancholy pleasure at the thought of the universal esteem and respect in which her poor Elias had been held. But meeting the hard expressionless gaze of Mr. Burge's tight little eyes, the appreciative compliment died upon her lips.

'So now,' resumed the visitor, diving for

his hat and carefully tucking away the handkerchief in its lining—'now, Mrs. Fiander, having spoken for myself and for my fellow-townsmen, and having assured myself that you are no worse in health than might have been expected under these extraneous circumstances, I will withdraw.'

He rose, ducked his head, extended his hand, and solemnly pumped Rosalie's up and down for about two minutes; finally backing to the door.

As he let himself out he almost fell over another caller who was at that moment raising his hand to the knocker. This was a dapper gentleman of about his own age, with an alert and sprightly air and a good-humoured, sharp-featured face.

Rosalie, just standing within the half-open parlour-door, caught sight of the new-comer and wondered who he might be. In a moment he had set her doubts at rest.

'Good-day, ma'am,' he remarked, advancing cheerily with outstretched hand. 'I must introduce myself, I see; I'm not so well known to you as you are to me. My name is Cross — Samuel Cross — and I am one of Mr. Robinson's clerks. Robinson and Bradbury, solicitors, you know — that's who I am.

I just called round to — to make a few remarks with regard to certain business matters in the hands of our firm.'

'Won't you sit down?' said Rosalie, hastily taking possession of her husband's chair. It should not, if she could help it, again be desecrated that day. She pointed out a small one, but Mr. Samuel Cross, without noticing the intimation, stepped quickly forward and seated himself opposite to the widow in the chair she had just vacated — Isaac Sharpe's chair. Rosalie contemplated him with knitted brows; since Mr. Sharpe, that trusted friend, had not thought fit to occupy his customary place himself that afternoon, she felt ill pleased at the intrusion of this presumptuous stranger.

What a callow little shrimp of a man it was, to be sure, and how unlike, with his spare form and small narrow face — a face which she mentally compared to that of a weasel — to the large, bland personality of Isaac!

'A matter of business,' she said drily. 'I am surprised that Mr. Robinson should send you on Sunday.'

'Oh, this is quite an informal visit, Mrs. Fiander; not at all official. I came of my own

accord — I may say, in my private capacity. This here is n't a six-and-eightpenny affair. He! he!'

'Oh!' said Rosalie, even more drily than before.

'No; seeing, Mrs. Fiander, that you are left so peculiarly lonely and desolate, I just thought to myself that it would be only kind to call in in passing and mention that your business matters, Mrs. Fiander, are in a most satisfactory position. I have frequently heard our firm remark that they seldom had to deal with affairs more satisfactory and straightforward.'

'My husband had a very clear head for business,' said Mrs. Fiander. 'I always found that.'

''T is n't that alone,' rejoined the young man, 'it is, if I may be permitted to express an opinion, the very satisfactory manner in which he has disposed of his property, on which I feel bound to congratulate you. I called round, private as I say, jist to let you know as all was *most* satisfactory.'

'Thank you. I had no doubt about it,' said Rosalie, surveying her visitor with increasing disfavour as he leered at her from the depth of Isaac's capacious chair.

'Ladies,' he pursued, with an ingratiating wriggle—'ladies is apt to be easily alarmed when legal matters is under discussion. The very terms which come so natural to us are apt to frighten them. Lor' bless you, I dessay when Mr. Robinson do talk about testamentary dispositions and such like it makes you feel quite nervous. But 't is only the sound of the words as is strange; the thing itself [meaning the testamentary dispositions of the late lamented Mr. Fiander] is, I do assure you, most satisfactory. What with the freehold property, meanin' the farm and the money invested in such good and safe securities—you may be sure that they are good and safe, Mrs. Fiander; for I may ventur' to tell you in confidence that the late lamented used to consult our firm with regard to his investments—I have pleasure in assuring you that very few ladies find theirselves in so satisfactory a position as you do find yourself to-day. I jist dropped in, unofficial like, to let you know this, for, as I said to myself, it may be a satisfaction to pore Mrs. Fiander to know *her* circumstances, and to understand that, desolate as she may be left, there is some compensations; and that, moreover, she has been left absolutely free and independent, the late

lamented not having hampered her by no conditions whatever.'

Here Mr. Cross, who had been leaning forward in his chair so that his face, with its narrow jaws and its little twinkling eyes, had been a good deal below the level of the slightly disdainful countenance of his hostess, now slowly straightened himself, clapped an exultant hand on either knee, and brought the jaws aforesaid together with a snap.

Mrs. Fiander could not help contrasting him once more with the friend who should by right be sitting opposite to her; how far more welcome would have been the sight of the good-tempered rubicund visage, the placid portly form! Even the contented, amicable taciturnity which Mr. Sharpe usually maintained during the greater part of his visits would have been far more to her mind than this loquacity, which somehow seemed unpleasantly near familiarity. Still, it was unreasonable to take a dislike to the poor young man merely because he looked like a weasel and was disposed to be a little over-friendly; no doubt his intention was kind.

She thanked him, therefore, with somewhat forced politeness, but could not repress a little forward movement in her chair which a sensi-

tive person would have recognized as a token of dismissal. Mr. Cross was not, however, of this calibre, and prolonged his visit until his hostess's patience fairly wore out. She rose at last, glancing at the clock, and observing that she thought it was time to get ready for evening church.

'I will have the pleasure of escorting you,' announced Samuel promptly and cheerfully.

Thereupon Mrs. Fiander sat down again.

'On second thoughts I 'm too tired,' she said; 'but I will not allow you to delay any longer, Mr. Cross — you will certainly be late as it is.'

He had no course but to withdraw then, which he did, unwillingly enough, after tenderly pressing the widow's hand and assuring her, quite superfluously, that she might depend on him to look after her interests in every way in his power.

Rosalie was disconsolately polishing the hand which had received this undesired token of interest, when the door creaked slowly open, and a tall, gaunt, elderly female, clad in rusty black, and wearing somewhat on the back of her head a flat black bonnet, with the strings untied, entered the room. This was Mrs. Greene, a personage generally to be met with

in this neighbourhood in households whose number had recently been either increased or diminished. She was equally at home, as she once remarked, with babies and with corpses; and she filled up the intervals by 'charing.' Her appearance was so genteel, and her manner of fulfilling her various duties so elegant, that the clergyman's daughter had once remarked that she was wonderfully refined for a char-woman; the appellation had stuck to her, and she was commonly known as the 'refined char-woman' among such of the 'gentry' as occasionally employed her in that capacity.

She had come to Littlecomb Farm to 'lay out' poor Elias Fiander, and she was remaining on as chief factotum and comforter. For it was n't to be supposed that the poor young widow 'ud be eq'al to lookin' after the maids — much less to turn her thoughts to doin' for herself. She now advanced slowly to the table, and after heaving a deep sigh proceeded to lay the cloth. Rosalie knew that she was burning to enter into conversation, but was too much dispirited to encourage her. But by-and-by, after a preliminary cough, Mrs. Greene remarked in a lugubrious tone:

'That 's a lovely cap, mum. Everybody was a-sayin' that you did look charmin' in your

weeds. Ay, that was what they said. "She do look charming" — that was the very thing they said; "'t is a comfort, too," says they, "to see how nice she do mourn for Mr. Fiander." They was all a-passing the remark one to the other about it, mum — admirable they said it was.'

'Nonsense,' cried Rosalie wrathfully, but with a little quaver in her voice; 'it would be very strange, I think, if I did not grieve for such a good husband. I wish people would n't talk about me,' she added petulantly.

'Talk!' ejaculated Mrs. Greene dismally. 'Ah, they will talk, mum, you may depend on it. They 'll al'ays talk, and perticlarly about a young widow. Lord, how they did go on about me when poor Greene died! They did n't leave so much as my furnitur' alone. Whether I could afford to keep it, or whether I 'd be for ridden house and goin' into lodgin's, and whether I 'd put the children in an orphanage and get married again — it was enough to drive a body silly the way they did go on.'

'Disgusting,' cried Rosalie, now faintly interested. 'The idea of talking of a second marriage when your poor husband was only just dead.'

'Why, that be the first thing they'd talk on,' with a kind of dismal triumph — 'more perticlar if a woman be young and good-lookin'. In your own case, mum, I do assure ye they be all a-pickin' out *your* second. Ah, that 's what they be a-doin', but as they all picks different men they don't so very well agree.'

'Mrs. Greene!' ejaculated her mistress indignantly, wheeling round in her chair, 'what do you mean? How dare you come and repeat such things to me — it 's positively indecent!'

'That be the very remark as I did pass myself to the men yesterday,' retorted Mrs. Greene, pausing to contemplate Mrs. Fiander with her hands upon her hips. 'The very thing. "'T is most onbecomin'," says I, "to be settin' yourselves up to pry into the affairs o' your betters. Missus," says I, "be a-thinkin' of nothing but her mournin' so far, and when she do make her ch'ice," says I, "she 'll please herself and pick out him as is most suitable." Them was my words, mum.'

'Well,' cried Rosalie, rising to her feet impetuously, 'I wonder you dare to own them to me, Mrs. Greene. I think that, considering you are a widow yourself, you ought to know better than to accuse another woman of such faithlessness. If you think I could

ever, ever forget my good kind husband, you are much mistaken.'

Mrs. Greene coughed drily behind her hand.

'Why should I marry again any more than you?' cried Rosalie, with angry tears starting to her eyes.

'Well, mum, the cases be very different. Nobody never axed I — 't was n't very likely as they should, considering I had six children and only my own labour to keep 'em. As for you, mum, nobody could n't think it at all strange if you was to get married again — considerin' everything, you know. Your station in life,' continued Mrs. Greene delicately, 'and your not bein' blessed with no children, and your fortun' and your *oncommon* looks — it 'ud be very strange if there was n't a-many a-coming coortin' ye — and you may depend upon it they will,' she cried with conviction. 'And seein' how young you be, mum, and how lonesome like, I should say it be a'most your dooty to take a second.'

'Now listen to me, Mrs. Greene,' said Rosalie very emphatically, 'I wish to put an end to this foolish gossip at once. You can tell everybody that you hear talking about the matter that I never intend to marry again. Never! — do you hear me?'

'Yes, mum,' returned Mrs. Greene, with every feature and line of her countenance expressing disbelief, 'I hear. P'r'aps I better begin by lettin' them two chaps know what called here to-day. I do 'low they'll be disapp'inted!'

'I wish you would n't talk such nonsense, Mrs. Greene,' cried Rosalie almost pettishly, though the colour rushed over her face, and a startled expression showed itself for a moment in her heavy eyes. 'Go away! I don't want to be worried any more; remember what I have said, that's all.'

CHAPTER III

Nothing coming, nothing going—
Landrail craking, one cock crowing;
Few things moving up and down,
All things drowsy.

NORTH-COUNTRY SONG.

ROSALIE passed a very unquiet night, and woke from a troubled sleep shortly after dawn. The dead-weight of grief, ever present to her since her bereavement, was now, as she dimly felt, supplemented by something else — something irritating, something unpleasant. As her scattered faculties returned to her she gradually recognised that this state of feeling was produced by several small causes. The two visits which she had received yesterday, and which she had supposed to proceed from mere officious good-will, had, as she now acknowledged, been prompted in all probability by aspirations as unjustifiable as they were unseemly. Her subsequent interview with Mrs. Greene had disagreeably enlightened her on this point, and had also made her aware of the kind of

gossip to which she must expect to be subjected. Then — all through that long, lonely, heavy day Isaac Sharpe had not once put in an appearance. He, her husband's faithful friend, the only real friend whom she herself acknowledged, had not thought fit to look in for so much as five minutes to cheer her in her desolation. As she thought of these things hot tears welled afresh to her eyes. Oh, how desolate she was! No one really cared for her, and, what was almost worse, no one seemed to believe in the sincerity of her affliction.

As she lay tossing uneasily on her pillow, and as the light grew and brightened, and the birds' jubilant songs mingled with the distant lowing of cows, a new sense of disquietude came to her, proceeding from a different and very tangible cause. It was broad day — Monday morning — a morning of exceptional importance at the farm — and no human being seemed yet to be afoot. Reaching up her hand to the old-fashioned watch-pocket which hung in the centre of the bed, she took down Elias's heavy silver repeater and pressed the spring. *Ting, ting, ting, ting, ting!* Five o'clock. Sitting up, she sent the two cases flying open and gazed almost incredulously at

the dial beneath. Ten minutes past five—no less! She sprang out of bed and flung open her door.

'Jane! Susan! What are you about? 'T is past five o'clock, and churning morning. How did you come to oversleep yourselves like that?'

There was a muffled murmur, a thud upon the floor, a *pat, pat* of bare feet across the room above, and a door overhead opened.

'Was ye callin', mum?'

'Was I calling? I should think I was calling! Have you forgotten what morning it is?'

'Nay, missus, that I have n't. Lord, no. 'T was this day se'ennight as poor master was buried. Dear, yes, so 't was.'

A lump rose in Rosalie's throat, but she steadied her voice and said coldly:

'I am not talking of that. It is churning morning, as you know very well. You should have been up and about an hour ago. Make as much haste as you can, now, and come down.'

She closed the door with just sufficient noise to indicate the condition of her feelings, and hastened across the room to the open window. Drawing the curtains apart, she

looked out. A glorious summer's day. Not a cloud upon the pearly-blue expanse of sky, the leaves stirring gently in a fresh breeze — a breeze laden with all the exquisite spicy scents of morning: the fragrance of dewy grasses, of sun-kissed trees, of newly-awakened flowers. The monthly rose-tree climbing round her mullioned window thrust its delicate clusters of bloom almost into Rosalie's face, but she pushed it impatiently aside. Her eyes cast a keen glance on the homely scene beyond. Above the time-worn roofs of the farm-buildings, where the green of the moss and the mellow red and yellow of the tiles were alike transfigured by this mystic glow, she could see last year's ricks shouldering each other, their regular outlines defined, as it were, with a pencil of fire; the great meadow beyond, which sloped downwards till it reached the church-yard wall a quarter of a mile away, broke into light ripples, tawny and russet, as the breeze swept over it.

Surely these were sights to gladden a young heart — even a heart that had been sorrowing — yet the expression of Rosalie's eyes grew more and more discontented and displeased, and a frown gathered on her brow.

The fowl were flocking impatiently about

the gate of the great barn-yard; yonder, on the further side, from beneath the tiled roof of the line of pigsties she could hear loud vociferations; turning her eyes towards the stable-buildings which ran at right angles to them, she could see that the doors were fast closed, and could hear the rattling of chains and stamping of heavy hoofs within. The Church Meadow ought to have been cut to-day — the grass was over-ripe as it was; men and horses should have been at work since three o'clock. No figures appeared even in the neighbourhood of the barn; and looking beyond to the barton proper, she could see that it was empty. No wonder that the lowing of the cows had sounded distant in her ears: they were still in their pasture by the river. Poor creatures! crowding round the gate, no doubt, as the fowl were doing close at hand, all clamouring alike for the attention which was evidently withheld from them. What was everyone about? Why had not the men come to their work as usual?

She performed her toilet hastily and somewhat perfunctorily, and when at last a sleepy-looking red-haired man came slouching up the lane which led to the farm, he was surprised to see a figure in rustling print and

broad-brimmed chip hat standing in the midst of a bevy of cocks and hens, scattering handfuls of grain with wide impetuous sweeps of a round, vigorous arm.

'Hallo! What's the hurry, Sukey?' he inquired pleasantly.

But the face which was flashed upon him was not the rosy and somewhat vacant one of Susan, but belonged to no less a person than 'Missus' herself.

'What's the hurry, Job?' she repeated severely. 'I should like to know why there is n't a little more hurry? What has become of all the men? Has anybody gone to fetch the cows? What is everyone about, I say?'

Job tilted his hat a little sideways on his red locks, the better to scratch his head, and gazed at his mistress with a puzzled and somewhat scandalised expression.

'Ye must expect things to be a bit onreg'lar for a bit, mum,' he remarked. 'Seein' the loss we 've had, and us all bein' so upset like about poor master, we ha'n't a-got the 'eart to go about our work as if nothin' had happened. It bain't to be looked for. Nay now,' he continued mildly, 'an' we did n't look to find yerself a-goin' about this way — we did n't, sure. It scarce seems nait'ral. If I may

make so bold as to say so, it do seem' — here Job fixed an expostulatory glance on the angry young face that was confronting him — 'it d' seem scarce right, mum.'

'Job Hunt,' returned his mistress haughtily, 'you are not called upon to make remarks upon my actions; but I will tell you so much: it is my duty to see that the work in this place is properly done, and I intend that it shall be properly done. Go and call the other men at once. Tell them if they are ever again so disgracefully late they shall all be fined. Call them quickly,' she added with an imperative tap of the foot, 'and then go and fetch the cows.'

As she turned to re-enter the house she caught sight of Susan, who was evidently exchanging astonished and depreciatory grimaces with Job, while Mrs. Greene, in the background, was raising hands and eyes to heaven.

'Come, get to work,' she cried sharply. 'Skim the cream, Susan; and you, Jane, get the churn ready. Well, Mrs. Greene, what are you staring at? Have you never seen me work before, that the fact of my turning up my sleeves need astonish you so much? I suppose you can find something to do about

the house. Give me that other skimmer, Jane.'

'Ho dear, yes, mum, I can find a plenty to do about this here house. I wur but a-lookin' at you, mum, because it do really seem a'most too much for flesh an' blood to be a-takin' on itself as you be a-takin' on yourself now, mum. Dear, yes! but it 's to be hoped as ye won't overtax your constitootion, Mrs. Fiander.'

'Go and clean the kitchen grate,' said Rosalie, beginning to skim with great rapidity and decision; 'and see that you blacklead it properly.'

'Ho yes, mum, *I'll* blacklead it,' returned the elder matron, without, however, attempting to move from the spot where she stood, and continuing to fix her eyes mournfully on her mistress — '*I'll* blacklead it right enough,' she repeated, with a kind of groan, after a pause, during which she had meditatively polished first one skinny bare arm and then the other with a not over-clean apron.

'Well, why in Heaven's name don't you go, then?' cried Rosalie impatiently, for she felt Mrs. Greene's sorrowfully disapproving gaze right at the back of her head.

'I be going, mum, I be going. If I mid

take the liberty of remindin' you, mum — 't is your *hat* as you 've a-got on your head.'

'Well?' inquired Rosalie, reddening ominously.

'Well, Mrs. Fiander,' returned the charwoman with an insinuating smile, 'would n't you like me to run upstairs wi' it now and fetch you down your cap?'

'No,' replied her mistress very shortly; 'if I had wished for it I should have sent for it. You need not be so officious. The strings would get in my way while I worked,' she added a little inconsequently. She felt she was lowering herself by making this explanation, yet she could not bear that even Mrs. Greene and the two maids should think her wanting in respect to Elias's memory.

Mrs. Greene withdrew, murmuring under her breath that it was to be 'oped as nobody would n't chance t' look in that morning, which was not, indeed, very likely, the hands of the old-fashioned clock in the kitchen beyond just pointing to the quarter-past six.

For some minutes nothing was heard but the clinking of the skimmers against the sides of the vats as the rich cream, clotted and crinkled and thick, was removed therefrom. The scene was a pretty one; indeed, such a

dairy on such a summer's morning must always hold a charm and a picturesqueness of its own; and now that the angular presence of Mrs. Greene was removed there was absolutely no discordant element in this cool harmony. The dairy itself was a wide, pleasant room, its buff walls and red-flagged floor throwing out the exquisite tints of the vast tracts of cream, each marked off by its own barrier of glancing tin, and varying in tone from the deep yellow of that portion destined for the morning's churning to the warm white of the foaming pailfuls which Job poured from time to time somewhat sulkily into the vat nearest the door. Then there was the green of the gently swaying boughs without, seen through windows and open door, the brilliant patch of sunlight creeping over the uneven threshold, the glint of blue sky between sunlit green and sunlit stone. The brave array of glittering cans on the topmost shelf added their own share of brightness; the great earthenware crocks and pans, some the very colour of the cream itself, some ruddy in tone, some of a deep rich brown, lent also valuable aid; then there were tall white jars containing lard, carefully-packed baskets and smooth wooden vessels

piled high with eggs, little squares of filmy gauze hung out on lines in readiness for the golden rolls of butter which they were soon to enfold. The figures of the girls themselves — for the mistress of Littlecomb Farm was no more than a girl in years — gave the necessary and very delightful touch of human interest. Susan and Jane, in cotton dresses and large aprons so immaculate that the mere sight of them was sufficient to recall that it was the first day of the week, were not without a certain rustic charm of their own; as for Rosalie, standing in the foreground, with her sleeves rolled up on her white arms, her print dress fitting so closely to her beautiful form, the hair hastily rolled up escaping into such exquisite curls and tendrils round brow and ear and shapely neck — Rosalie was as ever what her admiring old Elias had once called her — the leading article.

When the churn was fairly at work, the skim-milk duly meted out to the pigs, and the long procession of dairy cows were sauntering back to their pasture under the guardianship of Job and the three 'chaps' who had till then been busily milking, Rosalie removed her hat and sat down to breakfast.

The flush of annoyance still lingered on her

face, and, while she ate, her glance wandered through the window to the premises without. She could hear Robert Cross and James Bundy leisurely leading out the horses, inducing them with many objurgations to stand while they were being harnessed to the rattling, creaking mower. How slow they were! They should have been in the field hours ago, and yet they slouched about as though the beautiful golden morning were not already half over. Now, at last they were starting — no, here was James coming back for something they had forgotten. Rising hastily from her chair, she leaned out of the open window, tapping impatiently on the pane. 'What are you about, Bundy? Why on earth don't you try and make a little more haste?'

'Mum?' gasped Bundy, turning round a vacant, weather-beaten countenance adorned with the smallest fraction of a nose which it was possible for the face of man to possess.

'I say, why don't you make more haste when you have lost so much time already?'

'I be making so much haste as ever I can,' responded James, much aggrieved. 'I be just a-comin' to fetch the ile-can. 'T would n't be no use to get to work without the ile-can.'

'Why did n't you think about the oil-can

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while Cross was harnessing the horses? 'T is nearly eight o'clock — you have lost half your morning's work.'

Bundy looked up at the sky; then, still in an aggrieved manner, at his mistress.

'We was all so upset,' he was beginning, when she interrupted him fiercely:

'Don't let me hear another word about your being upset! If I can attend to my business, you can attend to yours, I should think. 'T is but an excuse for disgraceful laziness.'

'We *was* upset,' asserted Bundy with much dignity, 'and, as for bein' behind, if it comes to that we can keep on workin' a bit later this a'ternoon.'

'You must certainly work later this afternoon; but how long will this fine weather last, think you? Besides, you know as well as I do that it is much better for the horses to work in the early morning. There! get started now, and try to make up for lost time.'

She returned to her breakfast, and James rejoined his companion at a slightly accelerated pace. But, by-and-by, her attention was caught by the sound of voices, apparently in placid conversation. Back to the window again flew she: the village carpenter, who was supposed to be repairing the yard-gate, had

just arrived, and was leaning negligently against one of the posts, while Abel Hunt, Job's brother, a large bucket of pig-food in either hand, was leisurely talking to him.

'I will give them a few minutes,' said Rosalie to herself. 'After all, I must n't be too hard on them.'

Once more she went back to the table, finished her egg, and drank her second cup of tea, the trickle of talk meanwhile continuing without ceasing.

Pushing back her chair, she returned to the window impatiently. The carpenter had remained in the same attitude, without even unfastening his bag of tools; Abel had set down his pails, and propped himself up against the other gate-post; the pigs were wildly protesting in the background.

Rosalie recrossed the room hastily and went to the door.

'Do you intend to gossip here all day?' she inquired with flashing eyes.

'We was jest a-talkin' about the melancolly event,' explained the carpenter.

'You will oblige me,' said Rosalie, 'by keeping to your work. Abel, take those pails across to the sties at once. Remember, I will have no more dawdling.'

Abel took up his pails, and the carpenter unfastened his tools, the expression of both faces alike shocked, wounded, and astonished.

'If this goes on,' murmured Rosalie to herself, 'I shall not only break my heart, but go out of my mind. Oh, Elias, you were clever as well as kind — everything seemed to go by clock-work when you were here — oh, why did you leave me?'

CHAPTER IV

> An' o' workèn' days, oh! he do wear
> Such a funny roun' hat, — you mid know 't —
> Wi' a brim all a-strout roun' his heäir,
> An' his glissenèn eyes down below 't;
> An' a coat wi' broad skirts that do vlee
> In the wind ov his walk, round his knee.
>
> WILLIAM BARNES.

ALL the forenoon was passed in butter-making, and in the afternoon Rosalie betook herself to the mead to superintend the operations of James and Robert. It was not until after tea that she had leisure to change her dress and make her way, by the well-known little footpath that skirted the corn-fields and wound across the downs, to Isaac Sharpe's farm.

She found that worthy standing contemplatively in the middle of his yard. There had been sheep-shearing that day, and the master had worked as hard as any of the men; now, however, the naked, ungainly-looking ewes had returned to their pasture, the newly-taken fleeces lay neatly piled up in a corner of the barn, and Isaac was at liberty to straighten

his weary back, relax his muscles, and smoke the pipe of peace.

Tall, massive, and imposing was this figure of his, ever at its best in the smock-frock and serviceable corduroys and leggings of week-day wear; his wideawake, turned up at the back and projecting in front in the orthodox shovel form, was decidedly more becoming than the Sunday beaver. He started as the yard-gate creaked upon its hinges, and Rosalie's black-robed figure passed through.

'Why, Mrs. Fiander,' he cried, hastening towards her, 'be this you? I 'm glad to see ye. Is there anything I can do for 'ee?'

Rosalie could hardly have defined the motive which prompted her visit; her desolate heart felt the need of sympathy; in this strange new life of hers she yearned to find herself once more, if but for a moment, in touch with the past. 'No, Mr. Sharpe,' she said with a little gasp, 'I don't think there 's anything you can do for me. I only came because I — I — oh, Mr. Sharpe, everything is going wrong!'

Isaac Sharpe took out his pipe and opened his eyes very wide.

'Come,' he said, 'come — tell me what be the matter.'

'Everything 's the matter,' returned the widow in a shaking voice. 'Oh, Isaac, I can't get on without Elias!'

'Can't 'ee now, my dear?' returned Isaac, blinking very hard. 'Well, I 'm sure 't is nat'ral.'

Rosalie gave a little sob, and the farmer, stretching out a large brown hand, patted her arm soothingly.

'Don't 'ee take on, though,' he said. 'Nay now, don't 'ee take on, my dear. Cryin' never did nobody no good.'

'I 'm so lonely,' went on the girl brokenly. 'I miss him at every turn.'

'Ye 'd be like to do that,' responded Sharpe judicially. 'Dear, yes — ye 'd be like to do that.'

'Everything is at sixes and sevens,' she pursued plaintively. 'The men think they can do just as they like; it was eight o'clock before they began their mowing this morning.'

'Well, I never!' ejaculated Isaac. 'Eight o'clock! What be the world comin' to?'

'The very maids won't get up,' continued Rosalie. 'This was churning morning, and it was after five before anybody moved. None of the men came near the place until

six; the cows were left in the pasture, none of the beasts were fed!'

'Shockin'! shockin'!' commented the farmer. 'Dear heart alive! I never heard o' sich doin's!'

'When I speak to them,' cried Rosalie, her voice rising with the recollection of her wrongs, 'they turn round and tell me they are all too much upset to think of work.'

'Do they now?' in tones of deep disgust. 'Well, an' that's a pretty story!'

'Yes. And you know, Mr. Sharpe, 't is the last thing Elias would have wished — that the work should be neglected and everything allowed to go wrong like this; yet they seem to think me heartless for expecting things to go on as before. And the worst of it all is' — here poor Rosalie began to weep hysterically — 'they don't any of them believe that I am sorry for Elias, and they think I 'm going to marry again; and, and — two hateful, odious, impudent young men have already come to court me.'

Her sobs well-nigh choked her as she made this last announcement; and Isaac, full of concern, fell to patting her arm again.

'Don't 'ee now, my dear, don't 'ee. Well, 't is very annoyin' for 'ee, I 'm sure. There,

don't 'ee cry so. Well, well! to think on't! Started coortin' a'ready, have they? Well, they mid ha' waited a bit! But come in a minute, do 'ee, Mrs. Fiander, and sit 'ee down. Dear heart alive! dear heart alive! poor Elias 'ud be terrible upset if he were to see ye a-givin' way like this.'

He half persuaded, half propelled the still weeping widow across the yard and into his kitchen, where, sitting down near the table and covering her face with her hands under the heavy crape veil, she continued to sob until her host was nearly distracted.

'Here, my dear, take a sup o' this, 't will do ye good.'

Rosalie threw back her veil and took the glass which he offered her. Raising it to her lips, she found that the dark decoction which it contained was excessively strong, unusually acid, and unspeakably nasty. Fresh tears, not prompted by sorrow this time, started to her eyes as she set down the glass.

'Thank you, Mr. Sharpe,' she said; 'I am better now. I don't think I'll finish it. It seems very strong.'

'Ah, it's that,' agreed the farmer with some pride. 'Sloe wine Bithey d'call it; she do make a quart every year. Wonderful good

for the spasms, or sich-like. She do get taken that way sometimes in her in'ards, pore old soul! an' she says a drop o' this do al'ays set her to rights. Sloe wine! ah, that's what it be called; ye'd scarce think 't were made o' nought but the snags what grows in the hedges — jist snags an' a trifle o' sugar. But I do assure ye 't is that strong 't will sometimes lift the cork out o' the bottle. Now, Mrs. Fiander, ye'd best finish it; 't is a pity to let the good stuff go to waste.'

But, as Rosalie gratefully but firmly declined, the worthy man appeased his thrifty conscience by draining the glass himself.

'Well now, Mrs. Fiander,' he resumed, as he set it down, 'I be trewly sorry that ye be so vexed an' ann'yed wi' the men comin' so late; but, if I may advise 'ee, be a bit stiff wi' 'em; don't 'ee let 'em fancy they can impose upon 'ee because ye be a woman.'

'I assure you, Mr. Sharpe, I showed them very plainly that I was vexed this morning. I spoke as severely as I could.'

'Lard, my dear, them chaps don't care for words; more pertic'lar a woman's words. Bless you! they've all got women-folks o' their own, an' they be well used to scoldin'. 'T is different wi' us men; when we be angry

we can *dang* here and there, and use a bit o' language. Then, d' ye see,' said Isaac, leaning forward confidentially, 'the chaps understand as we be in earnest; but 't 'ud be no manner o' good your tryin' to do that, my dear; 't would n't come nat'ral to 'ee, and they would n't think a bit the better of 'ee for it. Nay, nay,' he repeated mournfully, 'they would n't think the better of 'ee.'

A faint smile hovered round Rosalie's lips, but Isaac remained quite serious.

'A woman must show by her deeds that she be in earnest,' he went on after a pause. ''T is the only way, my dear. Deeds and not words for a woman!'

Here he paused again, shaking his head reflectively. It was possible that his thoughts had travelled back to that memorable box in which his erring father had enshrined the riven locks that testified to his own transgressions and the vigorous retaliation of his wife. Isaac's late mother had certainly been a woman of action.

'That 's it, my dear,' repeated Sharpe, emerging from his reverie, 'ye 'll be forced to turn to deeds. Next time them chaps comes late, jist you up an' fine them. Says you, "Short work desarves short pay. Bear in mind," says

you, "that accordin' to the work shall be the wage."'

'Yes, I might try that,' agreed Rosalie. 'But the worst of it is they lose so much time and do their work so badly when they do come.'

'Then, jist make a' example o' one o' them — that's your best plan. Give the worst o' them the sack, and ye'll find the others 'ull settle down like — like lambs,' said the sheep-farmer, bringing out the simile triumphantly.

'Thank you very much for your advice, Mr. Sharpe. I'll take it. And now — ' she paused a moment, blushing — 'what would you recommend me to do with regard to my other difficulty? How am I to make people understand that I don't mean to marry again?'

'Well, a body 'ud really think they need n't be so pushin',' remarked Isaac. 'It be downright ondacent for 'em to be a-hangin' about 'ee so soon ——'

'They have no business to think of it at all, Mr. Sharpe,' interrupted the widow fiercely. 'I shall never, *never* put anyone in my dear Elias's place!'

'That's very well said, my dear,' returned Isaac, looking at her with real kindness and emotion. ''T is the proper spirit. I myself,

as you may have heard me say, was never one to set up for wedlock. Well, ye 've had a husband, and a good 'un, an' you be in the right o't to be satisfied wi' that, just as I be satisfied wi' havin' no wife at all. Dear heart alive! when I were a young chap the maids did use to be castin' their eyes at me, but I never took no notice, and when I grew more staid there was one very perseverin' woman, I do mind — very perseverin' she were. Ah, she come to house here, time and again, wi' one excuse or another, and at last, so soon as I did see her comin' I did use to shut door in her face.'

'Why, that 's what I shall do,' cried Rosalie, laughing, and clapping her hands — 'that 's the very thing I shall do. Thank you for the hint, Mr. Sharpe. That again, you see, will be deeds, not words.'

Isaac looked kindly at the bright face and sparkling eyes, and nodded cheerfully.

'That be the way to take 'em.'

'I only wish I had thought of it on Sunday,' she went on. 'Those two men sat and talked so long, that I was wishing them anywhere. I expected you on Sunday, Mr. Sharpe,' she added, in an altered voice, while the smile vanished from her face.

'Did 'ee?' said Isaac, abashed, and guilty.

'Yes, I did, indeed — I thought you would have come if only in memory of old times.'

'Why, to tell the trewth, I could n't a-bear to go nigh the place,' blurted out the farmer. 'Nay, nay — I 've been a-goin' to Littlecomb Farm Sunday after Sunday for nigh upon five and twenty year. I don't know how you could expect me, Mrs. Fiander, to go there now as he be gone.'

He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his smock-frock, and at this tribute to Elias's memory his widow forgave the gruffness of Isaac's tone, and almost, but not quite, the slight to herself.

She gazed at him for a moment in silence with a quivering lip, and he wiped his eyes again and heaved a sigh.

'You do not think of me at all,' said Rosalie, at last. 'You don't consider my loneliness, or what I feel when I sit there, looking at the two empty chairs, and thinking of how I used to sit between you, and how happy we used to be. Is n't it worse for me to see his empty place than you? You might have come — even if it did hurt you — you might have come to bring me a word of comfort. I think you were very unkind, Mr. Sharpe!'

'Don't 'ee now, my dear,' stammered Isaac, almost purple in the face, and with his usually keen eyes suffused with tears. 'I do really feel touched to the 'eart when you look at me so pitiful and say such things. God knows I'd be main glad to comfort you, but what can the likes of I do?'

'You could let me feel that I had still a friend,' sobbed Rosalie. 'You might come and sit in your old chair, and we could — we could talk about Elias.'

'That's trew, so we could,' agreed Isaac in a choked voice. 'Well, next Sunday — if I live so long — I'll not let nothing hinder me. I'll come, my dear. I d' 'low I should ha' thought of you yesterday, but I could n't seem to think o' nothing but how 'Lias war n't there.'

'Well, I shall be very glad to see you,' said Rosalie, rising, and tremulously beginning to pull down her veil. 'And I am very grateful for your kindness. Perhaps,' she added hesitatingly, 'you might be able to look in one day during the week?'

'Nay,' returned the farmer, 'nay, Mrs. Fiander, not before Sunday. I be very busy to-week — we be shearin', d' ye see, and there's the big mead to be cut. Nay — not before Sunday.'

'Oh, very well,' she responded a little stiffly; and she went out of the house and across the yard without speaking again except to say Good-bye at the gate.

The downs were now all bathed with the light of the sinking sun, and the topmost branches of the hedges which bordered the cornfields seemed turned to gold; while the banks beneath had begun already to assume the deeper tint that spoke of gathering dew —dew that the morning light would turn to a very sheet of silver; but Rosalie could only see the beauties of the world without through a mist of crape and tears.

'I have not a friend in the world,' she said to herself, 'not one! Isaac would n't even take the trouble to walk a quarter of a mile to see how I was getting on after following his advice. He is only coming on Sunday as a sort of duty, not because he wants to. Well, never mind, I will show him and everyone that I can look after myself. I want nobody's pretended pity since nobody really cares.'

And she held up her head beneath its heavy veil, and went on her way with a stately carriage and a firm step.

CHAPTER V

> He drow'd
> Hizzelf about, an' teäv'd an' blow'd,
> Lik' any uptied calf.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> An' mutter'd out sich dreats, an' wrung
> His vist up sich a size!
>
> WILLIAM BARNES.

ON the next morning when the men came slowly sauntering to their work they were surprised to see Mrs. Fiander, clad this time not in homely print but in ceremonious black, standing by her own door, with a severe expression of countenance. She held a note-book in her hand, and as each arrived she jotted down some memorandum therein. When the last straggler had appeared upon the scene, she summoned the entire band before her.

'Men,' she said, speaking calmly and very distinctly, 'since you seem to pay no attention to what I say, I must show you that I am not to be trifled with. I shall fine every one of you this morning for being late. I shall continue to fine you each morning that you *are* late, and I shall deduct from your pay

a certain amount for every hour that you wilfully waste. In fact, for the future your wage shall be in exact proportion to the work you do.'

The men stared, gaped, and looked sullenly first at one another and then at their mistress.

'Do you understand?' she inquired sharply.

Job Hunt, his red-bearded face even more glowing than usual, answered in surly tones for himself and comrades.

'Nay, missus, us can't say as we do!'

'Well, then, I'll make it clear to you,' rang out the brisk young voice. 'You are paid for the work you do during certain hours, and if you don't come here punctually, or if you waste any of those hours, I shall deduct from your weekly wage the value of the lost time — I shan't pay you, in fact, for work you don't do!'

'Nay, now,' responded Job, rolling his head from side to side, and assuming a bullying air. 'I don't hold wi' these here reg'lations. Us don't want no new rules, do us, mates?'

'Nay, that we don't,' came the answer in a chorus of growls.

'Whether you want them or not, I mean to keep to them,' returned Rosalie. 'That will do; you can all go to work now.'

She turned, and went into the house; her heart was beating very fast, and she was rather white about the lips, but she had borne herself bravely, and no one would have guessed the difficulty she had found in nerving herself to take this stand.

She could hear the men's voices murmuring together discontentedly, but by-and-by the sound of heavy slouching steps moving away in different directions warned her that the group had dispersed.

It being the morning for cheese-making, she presently went upstairs to change her imposing black robe for her working dress, and, chancing as she came downstairs to look out of the window, she observed that Job Hunt was standing, arms a-kimbo, by the pigsties, in close conversation with his brother. Now, Job should at that moment have been far on his way to the pasture; Abel ought to have been feeding the pigs: this was palpable defiance.

'Deeds, not words,' said Rosalie to herself. 'They think I am merely threatening — I must show them I am in earnest.'

She went across the yard, note-book in hand.

'It is now half-past five,' she remarked.

'You, Job, are two hours and a half late; you, Abel, an hour. I have made a note of the time. Moreover, if I find that you continue to disobey me I shall not keep you in my service.'

Job made an indescribable sound, between a snort and a groan, and slowly walked away. Abel, however, continued to stare darkly at his mistress, without changing his position.

As Rosalie, now thoroughly incensed, was about to pour out upon him the vials of her wrath, she suddenly perceived — the fact being unmistakably impressed upon her — that the pigsties near which she stood were in a most disgraceful condition.

'Abel,' she said, 'when were these sties cleaned out? Not, I am sure, on Saturday.'

'I were — mortal busy o' Saturday,' returned Abel in sepulchral tones.

'Why were you more busy last Saturday than on any other Saturday?'

Abel shuffled from one foot to the other, and repeated sulkily that he had been mortal busy.

'You must clean them as soon as ever you have fed the pigs,' said Rosalie sharply. ''T is enough to bring fever to the place to have them in this state.'

'Pigs is n't p'ison,' responded Abel roughly.

'Do not attempt to answer me back like that,' she cried. 'It must be very bad for the poor animals themselves. Get to work without a moment's delay.'

'Saturday is the day,' growled the man. 'I 'm — blowed if I clean 'em out afore Saturday!'

'Mind what you are about,' said his mistress sternly, uplifting a warning fore-finger. 'I will not put up with impertinence or disobedience.'

'Saturday is the day,' shouted Abel; and the shuffling movement became so violent and rapid that he actually seemed to dance.

'This will never do,' said Rosalie. 'I see I must make a change at once. Abel Hunt, I give you notice to leave on Saturday week.'

'One change be enough for me, Widow Fiander,' retorted Abel, uplifting his voice as though his mistress stood a hundred yards away from him instead of barely two.

Rosalie's lips quivered.

''T is your own fault,' she cried passionately. 'If you behave in this way I must make an example of you. Unless you do as I tell you, you must go!'

'I 'm danged if I do clean the pigs out

afore Saturday,' shrieked Abel; and he threw his hat upon the ground, waved his arms, and stamped about like a maniac. 'I don't want no danged women-folk to come a-orderin' o' me;' and here Abel relieved his feelings by what Isaac Sharpe would delicately call 'a bit o' language.'

'Clean your pigs yourself, Widow Fiander! One change be enough for me! Notice me so much as ever ye like, I 'll not clean them pigs out afore Saturday!'

Then came a little more 'language,' and so on *da capo.*

Never had such an experience fallen to Rosalie's lot before; neither her kind old grandfather nor her doting husband had ever given her a rough word; while they lived her subordinates had invariably obeyed her orders with alacrity, and treated her personally with respect. The sound of Abel's strident tones, the sight of his inflamed face, above all the words he used and the insolence of his manner, positively frightened her. She turned pale, trembled — then, making a valiant effort to stand her ground, threw out her hand as though to command silence; but, as Abel continued to dance and rave, sheer physical terror overcame her, and she suddenly turned

and fled, her heart thumping violently against her ribs, the tears — never very far off during these first days of her bereavement — springing to her eyes.

She rushed upstairs to her room and flung herself across the bed, burying her face in the pillow in an agony of humiliation.

'What a fool I am! What a miserable fool! To be afraid of that wretched booby! How can I ever hope to rule these people if I show the white feather at the outset? Now, of course, they will think that they've only got to bully me and I shall at once give in. Oh, fool, fool! To give way to silly womanish fears at such a moment! Oh, oh! how shall I ever look them in the face?'

She continued to roll her head on the pillow for some moments; her cheeks had now become burning, and her heart still beat fast, no longer with terror, but with anger. By-and-by she sat up, pushed back her hair, and shook out the folds of her dress.

'After all, 't is never too late to mend,' she said to herself.

She went downstairs, and into the dairy, directing her maids somewhat sharply, and setting about her own work with flushed cheeks and a serious face. In course of time

her agitation subsided, and after her solitary breakfast she was quite herself again.

At noon, as she passed through the kitchen to the parlour, she chanced to glance through the open door, and observed that the men had gathered together in the yard, and were eagerly talking instead of making their way homewards, or retiring to the barn to eat their dinners. She feigned to pay no attention to them, however, and walked on to her own quarters.

Presently she became aware that the whole body was advancing towards the house, and a moment later Susan thrust in her round face at the door.

'Please, mum, the men be wishin' to speak a few words with 'ee.'

'Very well,' said Rosalie, 'I will go out to them.'

On reaching the threshold of the outer door she paused, looking round on the group, and waiting for them to take the initiative. Job was, as before, the first to speak.

'I be come to tell 'ee, Mrs. Fiander, as I wish to notice ye for Saturday week. These here changes bain't to my likin', and the mistress bain't to my likin'; so ye 'll please to suit yourself by that time, mum.'

He spoke gruffly, and eyed her impertinently, but this time she did not flinch.

'Very well, Job,' she said; 'I have no doubt I shall be able to do so without any difficulty.'

Abel was the next to advance, but Rosalie waved him aside.

'As it has already been settled that you are to leave,' she remarked, 'you can have nothing to say to me. Step back. Now who comes next?'

James Bundy, it seemed, came next; he approached a little hesitatingly, looking hard at his mistress.

'Please, mum, I wish to leave on Saturday week.'

'Quite right,' returned Rosalie with great unconcern. 'Next!'

James Bundy stepped back and Robert Cross stepped forward, smiling obsequiously.

'I 'm sure, mum, it do go agen me terrible to make sich a break as this here, but still, d' ye see, we can't nohow put up with ——'

'You need not take the trouble to explain — you wish to leave on Saturday week with the others, I suppose?'

''Ees — leastways ——'

'That will do,' said Rosalie. 'Now, Sam Belbin, you wish to leave too?'

Sam Belbin made a step forward and glanced round appealingly.

By this time his companions were looking very blank. The sudden assault by which they had expected to frighten their mistress into capitulation had apparently failed. Their respective attitudes had changed; she was calm and unmoved, and they were beginning to be seriously uneasy. Good places and regular pay were not to be picked up every day in that part of the world.

'Well, Sam?' said Rosalie kindly, as though to help him out.

Sam was the chief of the three 'dairy chaps,' a good-looking young fellow of about four-and-twenty, with a dark, good-humoured countenance and a certain jaunty air. As he now advanced a smile flashed suddenly over his face, his white teeth gleaming out pleasantly.

'Mum,' he said. 'Mum — Mrs. Fiander ——'

She smiled too.

'Well, Sam, what have *you* got to say? The usual thing, I suppose?'

'No, mum — not at all, mum. I — wish to say as I have n't got no fault to find at all, mum. I 'll come in better time to-morrow morn, an' ye 'll not have to speak to me agen, mum.'

'*Very* good!' said Rosalie in a different tone. At this unexpected speech a lump came in her throat, but she choked it down.

'Have the others got anything to say?' she inquired. 'Because, if so, I hope they will make haste and say it. My dinner will be getting cold.'

The men who had not hitherto spoken looked at each other uncertainly, their glances finally resting on the beaming countenance of Sam Belbin. After all, had he not chosen the better part?

'I do agree with he,' said one under his breath, and then another. By-and-by all remarked aloud, somewhat falteringly, that they just thought they would mention their wish to give more satisfaction in the future.

Job and his followers scowled at these renegades, but their mistress rewarded them with a gracious smile.

'Very well said,' she remarked. 'That's the proper spirit. Do your duty by me, and you will find me ready to do mine by you.'

The day was hers, as she felt when she returned in triumph to her dinner.

Isaac Sharpe happened to be strolling through the village that evening, when he was accosted by Mrs. Belbin, who was stand-

ing, as was her custom at this hour, arms a-kimbo, on her doorstep.

'There be a great upset up at Fiander's, bain't there, sir?'

Isaac brought his slow, ruminative gaze to bear on her.

'Why, what upset do ye mean, Mrs. Belbin? Things be like to be upset now that the master's gone to the New House. But I hope as your son an' the rest of 'em be giving the widow so little trouble as ever they can.'

'I dunno about that, sir. My Sam he do tell I as there was a regular blow-up this mornin'. I d' 'low as my son *he* did behave so well as ever he could. Says he to Mrs. Fiander, "Mum," he says, "I have n't no fault to find wi' you at all; and I 'll do my *h*endeavours to gi'e ye satisfaction." That were what *he* did say — my son Sam did; but there was others as, accordin' to all accounts, went on most scandalious.'

Here Mrs. Belbin rolled up her eyes and wagged her head significantly.

'Ah,' put in Mrs. Paddock, hastening to cross the road and join in the conversation, 'it did give me sich a turn when I heard on it, that I did sit down on the table. 'T were a good job as I did, else I should ha' fell

down. Sich doin's! The whole lot of 'em — aye, every single one as works for her — marchin' up to give her notice! 'T was enough to frighten a pore lone woman out of her wits.'

'I have n't heard a word of this,' cried Isaac emphatically. 'The *men* gave her notice, d' ye say?'

'All except my Sam,' put in Mrs. Belbin proudly. ''Ees, they all did go up in a lump, so to speak, and noticed her, one arter the other, till it come to my Sam's turn, an' then he up an' says, "Mrs. Fiander, mum," says he, "I have n't got no fault to find wi' ye;" and a few more, when they heard that, heartened theirselves up and follered his example.'

''T was very well done o' your Sam,' said Mrs. Paddock in a complimentary tone; 'but as for them others — why, they do say as Abel Hunt were a-dancin' an' a-swearin' like a madman. "I want no orderin' from danged women-folk," says he, just so bold as if the missus was his wife. And Job, he did shout at her so rough, and speak so impident! 'T was really shockin'!'

'I must go up and see her,' said Sharpe, much perturbed. 'I 'm sure I don't know whatever 's come to folks these times. As to

them Hunts — I 'll gi'e them a bit o' my mind. They should be ashamed o' theirselves to treat a pore young creature so disrespectful. They do think, I s'ppose, as Mrs. Fiander has n't got nobody to purtect her, and they can serve her so bad as they like. But them as was friends to her husband is friends to her. Pore young thing! Well, I be glad your son did do his duty by her, anyways, Mrs. Belbin. My Father A'mighty, these be times!'

He walked away at an accelerated pace, the women looking after him.

'He did speak so feelin', did n't he?' commented Mrs. Paddock. '"Pore young creature!" says he, d'ye mind? An' "Pore young thing!" Master be a very feelin' man!'

'Ah,' agreed Mrs. Belbin; 'an' he did say as he were glad my Sam did do his duty. Ah, he be a good man, master be! But I would n't like so very much to be Abel Hunt jist now — nay, nor Job neither.'

CHAPTER VI

Souvent femme varie,
Bien fol est qui s'y fie.

THE mistress of Littlecomb Farm had no cause to complain of the unpunctuality of any of her workpeople on the following morning. Each man appeared at the very moment he was supposed to appear, the maids were up betimes, and the business of the day progressed with far greater speed than usual.

At dinner-time she again observed a group of men in the yard, smaller in number, however, than on the preceding day, and talking with dismal countenances and hesitating tones. Susan came presently to announce, as before, that some of the men wished to speak to her.

Rosalie went out, and discovered a detachment of four awaiting her, two with plaintive, wobegone faces, the others in a state of surly depression.

'Missus,' stammered James Bundy, 'we be a-come — me and these here chaps — be a-

come to 'pologise, and to say as we hopes ye won't bear no malice, and as ye 'll overlook what has passed. We 'll undertake to give satisfaction from this time for'ard.'

'T is a pity you did not say that yesterday, James,' said Rosalie severely.

Bundy looked at Cross, and the latter's jaw fell.

'If ye 'd please to overlook it, mum,' resumed James, falteringly. 'We was, so to speak, took by surprise wi' the new rules, and we was persuaded' — here he darted a reproachful glance at Joe — 'I 've got a long family, mum,' he added tearfully, 'and my wife — she be near her time wi' the eleventh ——'

'Well, James, you have been foolish, but I do not altogether think it was your fault. I will make no definite promise, but I will see how you go on between this and Saturday week.'

'I be to go on Saturday week?' ejaculated James, whose wits were none of the keenest, and who was more impressed by the severity of the tone than by Rosalie's actual words.

'No, no, you foolish fellow! Come, I will give you another chance; but mind you behave very well.'

Robert Cross next came forward.

'Mine be a very long family, too,' he began, having evidently remarked the happy results which had ensued from Bundy's plea. Rosalie stopped him:

'Well, I will give you another chance, Cross,' she said. 'Next time, think twice before you follow a bad leader. As for you, Abel Hunt,' she said, turning sternly to that gentleman, 'I am at a loss to know what you can have to say — in fact, I have no wish to hear it, whatever it may be. You must go. No apology can atone for your insolence yesterday.'

'And how be you goin' to manage about them pigs?' inquired Abel plaintively.

'That is no concern of yours.'

'Mr. Sharpe was a-speakin' to me yesterday,' put in Job, very humbly, for his courage was fast oozing away, 'an' he did say 't would be terrible ill-convenient for 'ee to have so many chaps a-leavin' together, an' so me an' my brother agreed as we 'd ax to stop on.'

'I can do very well without you,' retorted Mrs. Fiander tartly. 'No, Job, you have behaved too badly. You have been the ringleader of this disgraceful business — you must certainly go.'

96310B

'On Saturday week?' faltered Job.

'Yes, Saturday week — you *and* Abel. How Abel can suppose I could possibly keep him after such conduct, I can't imagine. I certainly will not.'

'Mr. Sharpe did say' — Job was beginning, now almost in tears, when she interrupted him relentlessly.

'Never mind what Mr. Sharpe said. I have quite made up my mind as to what I shall do.'

She was thoroughly in earnest, and the men knew it. They fell back ruefully, and their young mistress returned to the house, carrying her head very high and setting her face sternly.

When her work was over that afternoon she set out, with a business-like air, on what seemed to be a tour of inspection; first walking briskly along the rows of pigsties, the condition of which had on the day before given rise to so much controversy. All was now as it should be; Abel, Sam, and one or two of the other subordinates having devoted their attention to them at early dawn. Here were pigs of every age and degree, from the venerable matron to the spry young porker just beginning to devote himself to the serious business of life — namely, growing fat. Seventy-two in all, and most of them doomed

to destruction within a few months: that was the part of the economy of farming which Rosalie most disliked; it was the blot on the otherwise poetical and peaceful avocation. But she had hitherto been taught to consider the presence of these pigs an absolute necessity. Was this really the case? Might not she, with her woman's wit, devise some better expedient by means of which the obnoxious animals could be dispensed with, and at the same time waste of skim-milk and whey avoided?

Leaving the yard, she betook herself to the orchard, where a few more porcine families were taking exercise. Their presence somewhat detracted from the picturesque appearance of the place, which, though the 'blooth' or blossom had long since fallen, had still a considerable share of beauty of its own. The sunlight beating down now through the delicate green leafage brought out wonderful silvery lights from the lichened trunks, and outlined the curiously gnarled branches. It struck out a golden path across the lush grass for Rosalie to walk on, and she passed slowly down the glade with bent head and serious face.

Turning when she reached the end to re-

trace her steps, she saw a well-known sturdy form approaching her, and advanced to meet Isaac Sharpe, still with a certain queenly air, and without quickening her pace. Isaac's countenance, on the contrary, wore a perturbed and puzzled expression; his brow was anxiously furrowed, and he gazed hard at Mrs. Fiander as he hastened towards her.

'I 'm a-feared ye 've had a deal o' trouble, here,' he began.

'Yes; I followed your advice, you see.'

'And it did n't altogether answer?' said the farmer, with a nervous laugh.

'Oh, yes, it answered very well. I think the men know I 'm in earnest now.'

'Them two Hunts come round to my place at dinner-time; they were in a taking, poor chaps! But 't will do them good. All the same, I think I 'd let 'em off, if I was you, Mrs. Fiander. Job be a roughish sort o' chap, but he be a good cowman; an' Abel, he be wonderful with the management o' pigs.'

'I 'm not going to let them off,' said Rosalie, her face hardening again as she thought of Abel's maniacal dance, and of the loud voice which had frightened her, and of Job's insolent manner when he had said, 'The missus bain't to my likin'.'

'Well, but 't will be a bit 'ard to find as good,' Isaac objected. 'P'r'aps ye 'll not better yourself. I doubt 't will be harder for you to get on wi' strange men.'

'I am not going to put strange men in their place. I am not going to hire any more men; I 'm going to have women. I can manage women very well.'

'But, my dear,' cried Isaac, opening his eyes very wide, and speaking in horror-stricken tones, 'women can't do men's work.'

'No, but they can do women's work. I have thought it all out, Mr. Sharpe, and my mind is made up. Job and Abel must go. I shall put Sam Belbin in Job's place.'

'Well, he have behaved well to 'ee,' conceded Isaac, unwillingly; 'but he be young. I doubt if he 's fit for 't.'

'I 've watched him,' returned Rosalie, positively, 'and I think he 's quite fit for it. He has worked under Job for some time, and is a capital milker. I think he will manage very well. As to Abel, I shall put no one in his place, for I mean to sell the pigs.'

'Sell the pigs!' ejaculated Isaac — 'at this time o' year?' His face became absolutely tragic, but Rosalie merely nodded.

'Why, what's to become o' your skim-milk,' he gasped, 'an' the whey, and that?'

'There will be no skim-milk,' said Rosalie. 'I shall make Blue Vinney cheese, as I used to make when I was with my grandfather. Some people are very fond of it. That is made entirely of skim-milk, you know. As for the whey, there will not be much nourishment in it, but I shall keep a few sows still, just to consume that and the butter-milk. They will not require much attention as they walk about here, you see, and there is always a lot of waste green stuff.'

'I don't think ye'll find many folks here what cares for the Blue Vinney cheese,' said Isaac, still much dejected. 'Nay, 't is all the Ha'-skim as they likes hereabouts. The Blue Vinney has gone out o' fashion, so to speak.'

'If they don't buy them here I can send them to Dorchester,' said the widow resolutely. 'They used to buy them up there faster than I could make them. So you see there will be no waste, Mr. Sharpe; there will be less work to do outside, and therefore I shall not miss Job or Abel; but, as we shall be very busy in the dairy, I must have two or three extra women to help me.'

Isaac stared at her ruefully; she looked brighter than she had done since her husband's death, but she also looked determined. He shook his head slowly; his mind was of the strictly conservative order, and the contemplated abolition of pigs from the premises of this large dairy-farm seemed to him an almost sacrilegious innovation. Moreover, to sell pigs in July; to make cheeses that nobody in that part of the world cared to eat; to replace two seasoned men who knew their business — whatever might be their faults — with that dangerous commodity, womankind — the whole experiment seemed to him utterly wild, and pregnant with disaster.

'I mean to do it,' said Rosalie, defying the condemnation in his face. 'By this time next year you will congratulate me on my success.'

'I hope so, I am sure,' said Isaac in a slightly offended tone. 'I came here to advise 'ee, but it seems ye don't want no advice.'

'Oh yes, I do,' she cried, softening in a moment. 'I value it of all things, Mr. Sharpe. My one comfort in my difficulties is the thought that I can talk them over with you. I have laid my plan before you quite simply, in the hope that you would approve.'

'Well, my dear,' said Isaac, somewhat mol-

lified, 'I don't approve, d'ye see? Since you ask my advice, I'll tell ye plain that I don't think the plan will work. Ye won't be able to sell your pigs to begin with; then ye'll want a man wi' more experience than Sam to look after the cows; it bain't such easy work — nay, that it bain't. Then, as to gettin' more women 'bout the place, I don't hold with the notion. I don't think it 'ud benefit ye, my dear. I don't trewly.'

Rosalie appeared to meditate.

'Think it over, Mrs. Fiander,' he urged; 'don't do nothing in a hurry; that be my advice.'

'Thank you very much. Yes, I'll think it over. You'll come on Sunday, won't you, Mr. Sharpe?'

''Ees,' agreed Isaac doubtfully. ''Ees, I'll come on Sunday. I be main glad you be thinking of taking my advice, Mrs. Fiander.'

'I am grateful to you for giving it,' said Rosalie with a sweet smile; and the farmer walked away, thinking that on the whole women were far less unreasonable than he had hitherto supposed.

The next day was Thursday — early closing day at Branston — therefore no one was surprised when Mrs. Fiander, having as she

averred some business to do in the town, ordered the gig in the forenoon. It was the first time she had used that vehicle since her husband's death, and she looked sorrowful enough as she climbed into it, clad in her deepest weeds.

The steady old horse looked round when she gathered up the reins, as though wondering at the innovation—for Elias had always been accustomed to drive—and was with some difficulty induced to start.

'Nigger be so wise as a Christian, that he be,' commented Bundy, as the gig and its occupant disappeared. 'He was a-standin' and a-waitin' for master, so sensible as I mid do myself. But he 'll have to get used to the change the same as the rest of us.'

'Ay, an' p'r'aps he 'll not like it so very well,' returned Abel sardonically. 'Give a woman a whip in her hand, and she fancies she 's bound to lay it on.'

But Nigger was suffered to jog along the road at his own pace, for the old sadness which had fallen upon Rosalie had for a moment checked her eager spirit, and a new preoccupation was, moreover, now added to it. Would Elias approve of what she was about to do, or would he agree with Isaac?

No, surely he would say that she knew best; he was always pleased with anything she did. He used to say that she was the best manager he had ever known; and, on the other hand, used frequently to speak of Isaac's 'notions' with good-humoured derision. It will be seen that Mrs. Fiander's meditations over her friend's advice had resulted, as indeed might have been expected, in the determination to adhere to her original plan, and she was now on her way to interview two personages whose co-operation would be necessary in carrying it out.

Her appearance in the shop of Mr. Hardy, the principal grocer of the town, caused a certain amount of commotion; everybody turned to look at the beautiful young widow, who had indeed for many days past formed the principal topic of conversation among the townsfolk; and much interest was aroused by her murmured request to see Mr. Hardy in private.

'Certainly, Mrs. Fiander. Step this way, ma'am. John, open the door there!'

John Hardy, a tall, good-looking young man in a white linen jacket, hastened to obey his parent's behest, and was even good enough to accompany the visitor along the passage

which led from the shop to the family sitting-room. It was empty at this hour, Mrs. Hardy being presumably occupied in household duties; and Mr. John ushered Rosalie in with much ceremony, and invited her to be seated in the best armchair.

Some disappointment was perceptible in his ingenuous countenance when he found that the interview which had been so mysteriously asked for was merely connected with cheese; but his father listened to Rosalie's proposition with grave attention.

'I don't exactly see how the plan would work,' he remarked, shaking his head. 'We sell your Ha'skim cheeses very fairly well, Mrs. Fiander.' Mr. Hardy was a discreet person, and was determined not to commit himself. 'But as for the Blue Vinney, I 'd be very glad to oblige you, but I 'm really afraid — you see there 's scarcely any demand for Blue Vinney nowadays. A few of the old folks ask for it now and then, but we don't get, not to say, a reg'lar custom for 't, and it would n't be worth our while to keep it.'

'I am considered a particularly good hand at making Blue Vinney,' said Rosalie. 'I used to be quite celebrated for it when I lived near Dorchester — in fact, I could easily sell

my cheeses now at Dorchester, only I thought I would give you the first offer as you have dealt with me so long.'

Growing warm in her excitement, she threw back her veil: John Hardy, gazing at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, thought Mrs. Fiander had never looked so handsome as in her widow's weeds.

'Dorchester!' commented the senior. 'That would be a long way for you to send, ma'am.'

'I am sure,' put in the son quickly, 'we 'd be sorry to think as Mrs. Fiander should need to take her cheeses to Dorchester, father.'

The elder Mr. Hardy glanced from one to the other of the two young faces, and, as Rosalie bestowed a grateful smile upon his son, an idea seemed to strike him.

'Well,' he said good-naturedly, 'you are trying an experiment, I understand, Mrs. Fiander. There 's always a certain amount o' risk in an experiment; but still, "Nothing venture, nothing have," they say. If you 're willing *to* venture I shall be glad to help you all I can. Send your cheeses to me, and I 'll do my best to sell 'em. I won't promise to pay money down for 'em,' he added, cautiously, 'same as I do for the Ha'skims, but I 'll try an' sell 'em for you, and we can settle about them after.'

'I am very much obliged,' said Rosalie, a little blankly, however, for she had not been accustomed to do business in this manner.

'We will use our utmost endeavours to push the goods — of that you may be sure,' cried young John eagerly; and she smiled upon him again, so graciously that he somewhat lost his head, and made several incoherent statements as to the excellence of Blue Vinney cheese for which his worthy father subsequently brought him to book.

'That 's not the way to get round a woman, my lad,' he remarked. 'Mrs. F. will just think you be right down silly; the notion o' tellin' her as Blue Vinney cheese was richer to the palate than Rammil — why, Rammil 's made altogether o' good new milk, and this here 's nothin' but skim. She makes cheese o' skim instead o' givin' it to the pigs, and you go and tell her all that rubbish. She 's no fool — the widow is n't — that is n't the way to make up to her.'

Meanwhile Rosalie had driven across the market-place and up a side street to the house of a certain auctioneer, and to her great joy found him at home.

He was a stout middle-aged man, with some pretensions to good looks, and more to being

a dandy. He was attired in a sporting costume of quite correct cut, and received his visitor with an air of jovial hospitality.

'Delighted to see you, I 'm sure, Mrs. Fiander. I feel *h*onoured. I am at your service for anything you may wish — you may command me, ma'am.'

Rosalie had begun by expressing a desire to transact a little business with him, and now proceeded to explain its nature.

'I wish to sell my pigs by auction,' she said. 'I have about sixty-five to dispose of, and I should like the sale to take place as early as possible next week.'

'Next week!' ejaculated the auctioneer, his face falling.

'Yes,' said Rosalie, with great decision.

'But — have you considered the question? It would be difficult to sell off such a number of pigs at any season of the year, but now — in the height of the summer! If I may advise you, Mrs. Fiander, don't be in such a hurry. Wait and sell the pigs at a more convenient time. Nobody 's killing pigs now, and most people as go in for fatting pigs have got as many as they want by this time.'

'It must be next week,' said the widow obstinately. Job and Abel were leaving on the

Saturday, and the stock must be got rid of before the new era began.

'You 'll lose to a certainty, ma'am,' said Mr. Wilson, running his hand through his well-oiled hair. 'What with all the regulations on account of the swine fever, the selling of such a number of pigs would be a difficult matter—at any season, as I say, and you don't give me no time scarcely to get out my bills——'

'The sale must take place before Saturday week,' insisted Rosalie. 'You must do the best you can for me, Mr. Wilson.'

'You may rely on that, Mrs. Fiander; but it really grieves me to think that you should lose so much.'

He paused, thoughtfully biting the end of one finger, and suffering his eyes meanwhile to travel slowly over the handsome face and graceful figure of his client. During this scrutiny he was not unobservant of the rich materials of which her dress was composed, and her general appearance of mournful prosperity.

'Well, I 'll tell you what I 'll do, he said. 'It 's against my own interest, but I always like to oblige a lady—particularly such a lady as you, Mrs. Fiander. I 'll drive round the country and see if I can persuade people

to buy up those pigs by private contract. I know a pig-jobber over Shaftesbury side as might be glad to take a good many off you, if he got them at a low price. If I understand you, Mrs. Fiander, the price is not an object to you?'

'No—o,' faltered Rosalie. 'Of course, I should like as much money as possible for them, but the price is not so important as to get rid of the animals as soon as possible.'

'Just so,' agreed the auctioneer cheerfully. 'Well, Mrs. Fiander, I shall lose by it, as I say, but I will try and arrange matters for you in this way. Under the circumstances, ma'am, I grudge no time or trouble spent in your service. I am always thought to be a lady's man — my late poor wife used to say that my consideration for ladies injured the business; but, as I used to tell her, a man has a heart or else he has n't. *If* he has a heart — if he has more feelings than his neighbours, he is n't to blame for it. "Let the business go, my dear," I 'd say, "but don't ask me to be hard on a woman."'

It had been whispered among the gossips of Branston that during the lifetime of the late Mrs. Wilson her lord had been wont to correct her occasionally with a boot-jack, but

these rumours had not reached Rosalie's ears; and even if they had she would probably have disbelieved them. Nevertheless, she did not quite like the manner in which the gallant auctioneer leered at her, nor his unnecessarily warm pressure of her hand on saying good-bye.

She drove homewards with a mixture of feelings. The inauguration of her new plan seemed to involve a considerable amount of risk, not to say loss; she felt conscious of the fact that she owed her very partial success more to the persuasion of her beauty than to faith in her prospects as a woman of business; yet there was, after all, satisfaction in thinking that she had carried her point.

CHAPTER VII

He that will not love must be
My scholar, and learn this of me:
There be in love as many fears
As the summer's corn has ears.

. . . . . .

Would'st thou know, besides all these,
How hard a woman 't is to please,
How cross, how sullen, and how soon
She shifts and changes like the moon.

HERRICK.

IT was with some trepidation that Rosalie awaited Isaac's visit on the Sunday following that long and eventful week. The good fellow was, indeed, so overcome when he found himself seated once more in the familiar chair, with the vacant place opposite to him, that she had not courage to make a confession which would, she knew, distress and annoy him — a confession which would have to be made, nevertheless.

Her own eyes filled as she saw Isaac unaffectedly wiping away his tears with his great red-and-yellow handkerchief, and for some moments no word was spoken between them. She filled his pipe and lit it for him, but he

suffered it to rest idly between his fingers, and made no attempt to sip at the tumbler of spirits and water which she placed at his elbow.

'Let 's talk of him,' she murmured softly, at last, bending forward. 'Tell me about when you knew him first.'

'Lard!' said Sharpe with a sniff, 'I know'd him all his life, I may say; I were with him when he were confirmed — and I were at both his weddin's. Yours was the only one I was n't at.'

Rosalie straightened herself, feeling as if a douche of cold water had been unexpectedly applied to her.

'Ah,' went on Isaac, shaking his head mournfully, 'I knowed his fust and his second missus well — they was nice women, both on 'em. The fust was a bit near, but, as poor 'Lias used to say, 't was a good fault. Ah, he 'd say that — a good fault.'

He put his pipe between his lips, and immediately took it out again.

'The second Mrs. Fiander,' he went on, 'was a good creatur' too — very savin'; delicate, though; but he 'd al'ays make allowances, her husband would, though it did seem to me sometimes as it was a bit disheartenin' to a man when his wife got the 'titus just at the

busiest time of year. Ah, he used to tell me often as it were n't no use to be a dairy-farmer without you had a active wife.'

Rosalie fidgeted in her chair: these little anecdotes of Isaac seemed to her rather pointless under the present circumstances.

'All I can say is,' she remarked after a pause, 'that *I* always found poor dear Elias the most considerate of men.'

'I d' 'low ye did,' said Isaac, turning his moist eyes upon her. 'He thought a deal o' you — he did that. Says he to me the first night I come here, when you come home arter getting wed, "I d' 'low," says he, "she 's the best o' the three."'

There was comfort in this thought, and Rosalie looked gratefully at her visitor, whose eyes had again become suffused with tears as he recalled this touching tribute.

'He used to say,' she observed presently in a low voice, 'that I was a very good manager, but I don't think it was on that account alone he was so fond of me.'

''Ees, he did use to say you was a wonderful manager,' said Isaac, disregarding the latter part of the sentence. 'Many a time he 've a-told me that you had n't got no equal as a manager.'

Sentiment was evidently not to be the order

of the day, but here, at least, was an opportunity of introducing the little matter of business which weighed so heavily on Rosalie's conscience.

'I think,' she said, diffidently, 'he would say I was wise in carrying out this new plan.'

'What new plan?' inquired Isaac, pausing with his handkerchief halfway to his eyes, and turning towards her sternly, though the tears hung upon his grizzled lashes.

'Why, the one I spoke to you of — about doing away with the pigs, you know,' she returned faintly.

'That there notion that I gi'e ye my advice agen?' said Sharpe grimly.

'Yes,' hesitatingly. 'I thought it over, as you told me to, and I did n't think I could manage differently. I find I can sell the pigs all right, and Mr. Hardy has promised to try and dispose of my Blue Vinney cheeses.'

Isaac blew his nose, returned his handkerchief to his pocket, and stood up.

'I 'm glad to hear as ye can manage so well,' he said sarcastically. 'You don't want no advice, that 's plain; and I sha'n't never offer you none agen. I 'll wish ye good day, Mrs. Fiander.'

'Oh, don't go away like that,' cried she

piteously. 'Please don't be offended with me. Such an old friend ——'

At this moment a figure passed across the window, and a loud knock was heard at the house-door. Rosalie rushed to the door of the parlour.

'Don't let any one in, Susan,' she cried. 'Say I 'm — I 'm engaged. Stay at least a minute, Mr. Sharpe — I want to tell you — I want to explain.'

Throwing out one hand in pleading, she held open the parlour door an inch or two with the other, and presently the manly tones of Mr. Cross were heard through the chink.

'I am sorry to hear that Mrs. Fiander is engaged. Will you kindly inform her that I will call next Sunday?'

'Tell him, Susan,' said her mistress, opening the door a little way, and speaking under her breath — 'tell him that I am always engaged on Sunday.'

Susan was heard to impart this information, and then the visitor's tones were heard again:

'That 's a pity! Tell her, if you please, that I shall 'ope to have the pleasure of finding her at home some afternoon during the week.'

'I am always out in the afternoon,' said Rosalie, speaking this time so decidedly that it was not necessary for Susan to repeat her words.

'Oh!' said the young man, addressing this time not the maid but the bright eye of which he caught a glimpse through the door, 'then I shall take my chance of finding you in the morning.'

'I am too busy to see anyone in the morning,' retorted Rosalie; and she shut the door with a finality which left Mr. Cross no option but to depart.

'You see I do take your advice sometimes,' said Rosalie, turning to Isaac, and speaking in a plaintive tone, though a little smile played about her mouth.

Isaac's back was towards her, and he made no reply; as she approached the burly form, however, she saw his shoulders heave, and presently, to her great relief, discovered that he was shaking with silent laughter.

'Well, my dear, ye don't do things by halves — I 'll say that for 'ee,' he chuckled. 'You 've a-got rid o' that there chap, anyhow. He 'll not ax to come coortin' again. Well, well, if ye manage as well in other ways I 'll not say that ye bain't fit to look arter yourself.'

'But it was your advice, you know, Mr. Sharpe,' she said demurely. 'You gave me the hint about shutting the door.'

'I d' 'low I did,' said Isaac; and, being a good-natured and placable person, his transitory sense of resentment was soon replaced by thorough appreciation of the humorous side of the situation.

The discomfiture of Samuel Cross gave a salutary lesson not only to himself. but to sundry other adventurous young men who had been a little hasty in their overtures to Mrs. Fiander. It was soon noised abroad that the young widow wished for the present to keep herself *to* herself, as the saying went, and that it would in consequence be advisable to abstain from making advances to her — at least, until she had laid aside her crape.

For some months, therefore, Rosalie enjoyed comparative immunity from the importunities which had so much annoyed her, while the new arrangements appeared to work amazingly well both within and without Littlecomb Farm.

Job and Abel departed in due course; the pigs were sold — at considerable loss to their owner; Sam was installed as chief cowman, and sustained his honours cheerfully, with-

out, however, appearing to be unduly elated; and three strapping damsels were engaged as dairy-maids. With their co-operation Mrs. Fiander turned out weekly a score and more of large round cheeses, which were stowed away in an upper room until, in course of time, they should become sufficiently ripe — some people might use the term mouldy — to have earned their title of 'Blue Vinney' cheese.

This process took a considerable time, and meanwhile the profits of the dairy were a good deal lessened since Rosalie had left off making the Ha'skim cheeses, for which she had been so particularly famed, and for which she had invariably received regular payment. Still, as she told herself, when the Blue Vinneys were disposed of, she would receive her money in a lump sum, and all would be the same in the end.

Her chief trouble at this time arose from the frequent calls of Mr. Wilson, the auctioneer, who, though he could not be said to be regularly paying attention to Rosalie, found, nevertheless, sundry excuses for 'dropping in' and conversing with her at all manner of unseasonable times. He made, as has been implied, no direct advances; and Rosalie,

moreover, could not treat him so unceremoniously as she had treated Mr. Cross, for she felt in a manner indebted to him about the sale of those unlucky pigs. He had carried the matter through for her with great difficulty to himself, as he frequently assured her, and he had steadily refused all remuneration. It was hard, therefore, for the young widow to repel or avoid him, and she was in consequence reluctantly obliged to endure many hours of his society.

CHAPTER VIII

Your own fair youth, you care so little for it,
Smiling towards Heaven, you would not stay the advances
Of time and change upon your happiest fancies.
I keep your golden hour, and will restore it.

ALICE MEYNELL.

ONE September day Rosalie betook herself to the little churchyard where Elias lay at rest. Three months had elapsed since he had been taken from her, and she had not let a week pass without visiting and decorating his grave. She thought of him often, and her affectionate regret was in no way diminished; yet, though she was now on her way to perform this somewhat melancholy duty, she advanced with a bright face and a rapid bounding step.

She was young, full of vigour and elasticity, and on such a day as this — an exquisite golden day, full of sunshine, and yet with a tartness hinting of approaching autumn in the air — every fibre of her being thrilled with the very joy of life.

When she knelt by her husband's grave, however, her face became pensive and her

movements slow. Taking a pair of garden shears from the basket which she carried, she clipped the short grass closer still, laid the flowers gently down on the smooth surface, placed the dead ones in her basket, and, after lingering a moment, bent forward and kissed the new white headstone.

As she rose and turned to go away, her face still shadowed by tender regret, she suddenly perceived that she was not alone. At a little distance from her, ensconced within the angle of the churchyard wall, a man was sitting, with an easel in front of him. Above the large board on the easel she caught sight of a brown velveteen coat and a flannel shirt loosely fastened with a brilliant tie; also of a dark face framed in rather long black hair and shaded by a soft felt hat of peculiar shape. From beneath its tilted brim, however, a pair of keen dark eyes were gazing with intense curiosity at the young woman, and, though he held a palette in one hand and a brush in the other, he was evidently more interested in her than in his painting.

Rosalie, vexed that her recent display of feeling had been observed by this stranger, walked quickly down the little path, colouring high with displeasure the while, and assuming

that stately carriage which came naturally to her in such emergencies.

The gentleman turned slowly on his camp-stool, his eyes twinkling and his dark moustache twitching, and watched her till she was out of sight.

Rosalie was clad in her morning print, and wore her wide-brimmed chip hat, so that her attire gave no indication of her station in life. As her tall figure disappeared the man rose, stepped past his easel — which supported a canvas whereon already appeared in bold firm lines a sketch of the antiquated church porch — and made his way up the path and across the grass to Elias Fiander's grave.

'Let us see,' he murmured; 'that kiss spoke volumes. It must be a sweetheart at the very least; yet when she came swinging down the meadow-path she certainly looked heart-whole. Here we are — a brand-new stone. Funny name — Elias Fiander! No — aged sixty-two. Must have been her father, or perhaps her grandfather — the girl looked young enough — so all my pretty romance has come to nothing. I wish she had stayed a few minutes longer — I would give something to make a sketch of her.'

He went back to his work whistling, and

thinking over Rosalie's beautiful face and figure regretfully, and with an admiration that was entirely æsthetic, for he had a cheery, rotund little wife at home in London, and half a dozen children to provide for, so that he was not given to sentiment.

It was, perhaps, because his admiration was so innocent and his ambition so laudable, that a few days later his wish to transfer Rosalie's charms to canvas was granted in a most unexpected way.

It had been unusually hot, and the artist, having finished his sketch of the porch, was proceeding by a short cut through Littlecomb Farm to the downs beyond, in search of cooler air, when, on crossing a cornfield at the further end of which the reapers were busily at work, he suddenly came upon a woman's figure lying in the shade of a 'shock' of sheaves.

The first glance announced her identity; the second assured him that she was fast asleep. She had removed her hat, and her clasped hands supported her head, the upward curve of the beautiful arms being absolutely fascinating to the artist's eye. The oval face with its warm colouring, the slightly loosened masses of dark hair, were thrown

into strong relief by the golden background; the absolute abandonment of the whole form was so perfect in its grace that he paused, trembling with artistic delight, and hardly daring to breathe lest he should disturb her.

But Rosalie, overcome with the heat and tired out after a hard morning's work, slept peacefully on while he swung his satchel round, opened it quickly, and began with swift deft fingers to make a rapid sketch of her. A few light pencil strokes suggested the exquisite lines of the prostrate form, and he had already begun to dash on the colour, when, with a loud shriek and flapping of wings, a blackbird flew out of the neighbouring hedge, and Rosalie stirred and opened her eyes.

Rosalie's eyes always took people by surprise, and the artist, who had not before noticed their colour, suffered his to rest upon them appreciatively while they were still hazy with sleep; but when, with returning consciousness, he observed a sudden wonder and indignation leap into them, he threw out his hand hastily.

'One moment, if you please — stay just as you are for one moment.'

Still under the influence of her recent heavy slumber, and taken aback by the peremptory tone, Rosalie obeyed.

'What are you doing?' she inquired suspiciously, but without changing her posture.

'Don't you see?' he returned. 'I am making a picture of you.'

A warm tide of colour spread over the upturned face.

'You should n't do that without asking my leave.'

'A man must take his chances where he finds them,' said the artist. 'I don't often get such a chance as this. I am a poor man, and can't afford to let an opportunity slip.'

He had a shrewd sallow face and kind merry eyes, and as he spoke he paused in his work and smiled down at her.

'I don't want to be disobliging,' said Rosalie, 'but I — I don't like it. I fell asleep by accident — I should n't have thrown myself down like this if I had thought anyone was likely to see me.'

'All the better,' commented he. 'You could n't have put yourself into such a position if you had tried to. It has evidently come naturally, and it is simply perfect.'

He paused to squeeze out a little colour from one of the tiny tubes in his open box, and again smiled encouragingly down at his model.

'Now will you oblige me by closing your eyes again? No, don't screw them up like that; let the lids drop gently — so, very good. 'T is a pity to hide the eyes — one does not often see blue eyes with such Murillo colouring; but the length of the lashes makes amends, and I want you asleep.'

Again a wave of colour swept over Rosalie's face: the stranger marked it approvingly, and worked on.

'Is it nearly done?' she inquired presently. 'You said you would only be a moment.'

'I find it will take several moments, but I am sure you would not grudge me the time if you knew what a wonderful piece of good fortune this is for me.'

'How can it be good fortune for you?'

'Don't frown, please; let the lids lie loosely. I will tell you why I consider this meeting a piece of good fortune. Do you know what it is to make bread-and-butter?'

'I make butter three times a week,' returned Rosalie, somewhat amused; 'and I make bread too, sometimes.'

'Well, I have got to make bread-and-butter every day of my life, not only for myself, but for my wife and six small children, and I have nothing to make it with but this. You may

open your eyes for a moment if you don't move otherwise.'

Rosalie opened her eyes, and saw that he was bending towards her, and holding out a paint-brush.

'Now, go to sleep again,' he went on. 'Yes, that 's what I make my bread-and-butter with; and it is n't always an easy task, because there are a great many other chaps who want to make bread-and-butter in the same kind of way, and we can never be quite sure which among the lot of us will find the best market for his wares. But I shall have no difficulty in disposing of you, I am certain — therefore, I consider myself in luck.'

'Do you mean that you will sell that little picture of me?'

'Not this one, but a big one which I shall make from it. It will go to an exhibition, and people will come and look at it. As the subject is quite new and very pretty, I shall ask a big price for it, and there will be lots of bread-and-butter for a long time to come.'

'But would anybody care to buy a picture of a woman whom they don't know, lying asleep in a cornfield?' cried Rosalie incredulously, and involuntarily raising her drooped lids.

'Most certainly they will,' responded the

artist confidently. 'This will be a lovely thing when it is done. I shall come here to-morrow and make a careful study of this stook against which you are lying, and of the field; and I shall look about for a few good types of harvesters to put in the middle distance.' He was speaking more to himself than to her, but Rosalie listened with deep interest, and watched him sharply through her half-closed lids. Suddenly she saw him laugh.

'Perhaps if I come across a very attractive specimen of a rustic, I may place him just behind the stook here, peering through the sheaves at you, or bending forward as if he were going to ——'

'Oh, don't,' cried Rosalie, starting violently and opening her eyes wide. 'No, I won't have it, I won't be in the picture at all if you put anything of that kind in!'

'Not — if I chose a particularly nice young man?' inquired the painter, still laughing softly to himself. 'Not if I chose — *the* young man?'

'I am sure I don't know what you mean,' protested she, her cheeks crimson again and her lips quivering. 'There is no young man.'

'Do you mean to tell me, my dear child, that with that face you have lived till now

without anyone courting you—as I suppose they would call it?'

'Oh, of course they court me,' Rosalie hastened to admit; 'but I hate them all. And they are all very ugly,' she added eagerly, 'and would look dreadful in a picture.'

'There, you are frowning again. Come, let us talk of something less exciting. Keep still, please. So you make butter three times a week, do you? You are a farmer's daughter, I suppose?'

'I was a farmer's granddaughter,' she returned. 'My father was a schoolmaster.'

'Ah, that accounts for your educated way of speaking.'

'No, father died when I was quite a baby, but my grandfather sent me to school.'

'Then you live with your mother, I suppose?'

'No, I live alone here. This farm belongs to me.'

She could not help peeping out beneath her lashes to judge of the effect of her words, and was gratified when the busy brush paused and the dark eyes glanced down at her in astonishment.

'You live alone here? But this is a big farm — you can't manage it all yourself?'

'Yes, I do. It is hard work, but I contrive to do it. I am rather lonely, though.'

'That will be remedied in time,' said the artist encouragingly. 'The right man will come along, and perhaps,' he added with that queer smile of his, 'you won't find him so ugly as the rest.'

'You don't know who I am or you would n't speak like that,' said Rosalie with dignity; adding, with a softer inflexion of her voice: 'The right man has come — and gone. I am a widow.'

And unclasping the hands beneath her head, she thrust forward the left one with the shining wedding-ring.

Confusion and concern now replaced the careless gaiety of the stranger's face.

'I beg your pardon,' he said earnestly; 'I did not know. You look so young — I could not guess — but I am very sorry for my foolish talk.'

'I was married four years,' said Rosalie softly. Something gentle and kindly about the man invited confidence. 'My poor Elias has only been dead three months.' She paused abruptly, astonished at the sudden expression of blank bewilderment on the other's face.

'Your husband's name was Elias?' he queried. 'I beg your pardon for what must seem

idle curiosity. Was it — was it his grave that I saw you visiting the other day?'

'Yes,' said Rosalie, sighing and blushing; 'yes: I — I thought I was alone.'

'*Aged sixty-two!*' quoted the artist to himself, and he raised his hand to his mouth for a moment to conceal its tell-tale quivering. He thought of the girl's elastic gait on the morning when he had first seen her, and scrutinised once more the blooming face and admirably proportioned form before him; then, shaking his head slowly, went on with his work.

'Perhaps I shall call this picture "The Sleeping Beauty,"' he observed after a pause, with apparent irrelevance. 'You know the story, don't you?'

'Yes, but I don't think it would be a good name. She was a Princess who went to sleep in a palace in the wood, and I am just I — in my working dress, asleep in a cornfield.'

'These are mere details,' said he. 'The main points of the story are the same. She woke up all right, you know. You will wake up some day, too, my beauty.'

He put such meaning into the words, and smiled down at her so oddly, that she felt confused and uncomfortable. It was not that

her pride was wounded at the liberty he had taken in applying such a term to her: his admiration was so evidently impersonal that it could not offend her, and, moreover, his allusion to his wife and children had had a tranquillising effect. But the man's look and tone when he made this strange remark filled her with vague disquietude; both betrayed a secret amusement mingled with something like compassion. 'She would wake up some day,' he said; but she did not want to wake up! She was quite happy—at least, as happy as could be in her bereaved state—she asked nothing more from life. It would be certainly more unpleasant than the reverse to discover that life had surprises in store for her. But why need she trouble herself about a prophecy so idly uttered, and by an absolute stranger? Nevertheless, she did trouble herself, not only throughout the remainder of the time that the artist was completing his sketch, but frequently afterwards.

'You will wake up some day, my beauty!' Oh no, no; let her sleep on if this placid contented existence were indeed sleep; let her dream away the days in peace, until that time of awakening which would re-unite her to Elias.

CHAPTER IX

Then, proud Celinda, hope no more
To be implor'd or woo'd;
Since by thy scorn thou dost restore
The wealth my love bestow'd;
And thy disdain too late shall find
That none are fair but who are kind.

THOMAS STANLEY.

WHEN the artist had gone away, after lingering some days longer to complete his studies for the projected picture, the tenor of Rosalie's existence flowed on as calmly as even she could desire. She made and sold her butter; had her cheeses conveyed to Mr. Hardy's establishment in Branston; superintended the harvesting of her potatoes and mangels; laid in her winter store of oil-cake; and fattened sundry turkeys and geese for the Christmas market.

Early on a winter's afternoon Rosalie Fiander might have been seen walking slowly across the downs in the neighbourhood of Isaac Sharpe's farm. She carried a large basket, and every now and then paused to add to

the store of scarlet berries or shining evergreen which she was culling from thicket and hedgerow for Christmas decoration.

All at once she was surprised by hearing a step on the path behind her and a man's voice calling her name, and, turning, descried the tall and somewhat ungainly person of Andrew Burge.

Though it wanted yet a few days of Christmas, that gentleman, who was of a social turn of mind, had evidently begun to celebrate the festival, and Rosalie, gazing at him, was somewhat dismayed on perceiving the flushed hilarity of his countenance and the devious gait by which he approached.

She paused reluctantly, however, and shook hands with him when he came up.

'I 've been calling at your place, Mrs. Fiander,' he observed, 'to wish you the compliments of the season.'

'I am very much obliged to you,' said Rosalie. 'The same to you, Mr. Burge.'

'Ah!' said the young man, rolling an amorous eye at her, 'I was most wishful, Mrs. Fiander, to give you my Christmas greetings in person.'

'You are very good,' said she. 'I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New

Year. And now I think I must be moving home, for I am very busy to-day.'

'Allow me to escort you,' urged Andrew. ''T was a disapp'intment to me not to find you at home. I am rej'iced to have overtaken you, and anxious to prorogue the interview. There 's a season for condoliances and a season for congratulations. This here is the time for congratulations, and I am anxious, Mrs. Fiander, ma'am, to prorogue it.'

'My work is waiting for me at home,' said the young widow in alarm. 'I am afraid I shall have no time to attend to you; but, perhaps, some other day——'

She broke off and began to walk away rapidly; but the uneven, lumbering steps kept pace with hers.

'Christmas comes but once a year,' remarked Mr. Burge, somewhat thickly. ''T is a joyful season—a season as fills a man's 'eart with 'ope and 'appiness.'

This observation appearing to call for no rejoinder, Rosalie let it pass unnoticed except by a slight quickening of her pace; to no purpose, however, for her unwelcome companion kept by her side.

'Christmas for ever!' he ejaculated huskily, with an appropriate flourish of his hat. In-

stead of restoring it to its place after this sudden display of enthusiasm, he continued to wave it uncertainly, not over his own head, but over Rosalie's, leering the while in a manner which materially increased her discomposure. All at once she saw that a sprig of mistletoe was tucked into the band of Mr. Burge's head-gear, and almost at the moment she made this discovery he lurched forward, so as to bar her progress, and bent his face towards hers.

'How dare you!' cried Rosalie, thrusting him from her with a vigorous push; then, as he momentarily lost his equilibrium and staggered backwards against the hedge, she fairly took to her heels and fled from him at full speed, not towards her own home, but to Isaac Sharpe's premises.

'O Mr. Sharpe!' she cried breathlessly. 'Oh, oh, save me! He 's after me!'

'Who 's arter you, my dear? Why, you be a-shakin' same as an aspen-tree. What in the name o' Goodness has put you in such a state?'

'Oh, it 's — it 's that dreadful Andrew Burge. He overtook me on the downs and tried to kiss me. I think he 's tipsy, and I know he 's running after me.'

'Nay now, my dear, don't 'ee take on so. He'll not hurt ye here — I'll see to that. Dang his impidence! Tried to kiss ye, did he? That chap needs to be taught his place.'

'I'm sure he's coming down the path now,' cried Rosalie, wringing her hands. 'Oh, dear, if he does n't come here I dare say he'll go back to the farm, and I shall find him there when I go home.'

'Now, don't 'ee go on shakin' and cryin' so. Don't ye be so excited, Rosalie,' said Isaac, who was himself very red in the face and violently perturbed. 'Come, I'll walk home along of ye, and if I do find him there I'll settle him — leastways, if you'll give me leave. Ye don't want to have nothin' more to say to 'en, do ye? Very well, then, 't will be easy enough to get rid of 'en.'

So Isaac Sharpe, without pausing to pull a coat over his smock-frock, duly escorted Mrs. Fiander across the downs and home by the short cut; and, as Rosalie had surmised, Susan greeted them on the threshold with the pleasing information that Mr. Burge was waiting for her in the parlour.

'Very good,' said Isaac. 'Leave 'en to me, my dear. Jist you go to the dairy, or up to your room, or anywheres ye like out o' the

road. I 'll not be very slack in getting through wi' this here job.'

He watched her until she had disappeared from view, and then suddenly throwing open the parlour door shouted in stentorian tones to its solitary occupant:

'Now then, you must get out o' this!'

Burge, who had been sitting in a somnolent condition before the fire, woke up, and stared in surprise mingled with alarm at the white-robed giant who advanced threateningly towards him through the dusk.

'Why, what does this mean?' he stammered.

'What does this mean?' repeated the farmer in thundering tones. 'It means that you 're a rascal, young fellow.'

And Isaac qualified the statement with one or two specimens of 'language' of the very choicest kind.

'What do you mean, eh,' he pursued, standing opposite the chair where Andrew sat blinking, 'by running arter young females on them there lonesome downs, when you was not fit for nothin' but a public bar, frightenin' her, and insultin' her till she was very near took with a fit on my doorstep? What do ye mean, ye villain, eh? If ye was n't so drunk that ye could n't stand up to me for a minute

I 'd have ye out in that there yard and I 'd give ye summat!'

Mr. Burge shrank as far back in his chair as was compatible with a kind of tipsy dignity, and inquired mildly:

'Why, what business is it of yours, Mr. Sharpe?'

'It's my business that I won't have 'Lias Fiander's widow insulted nor yet put upon, nor yet bothered by folks as she don't want to ha' nothin' to say to.'

'Mr. Sharpe,' protested Andrew — 'Mr. Sharpe, I cannot permit such interference. My intentions was *h*onourable. I meant matrimony, and I will not allow any stranger to come between this lady and me.'

'Ye meant matrimony, did ye?' said Isaac, exchanging his loud, wrathful tone for one of withering scorn. 'Mrs. Fiander does n't mean matrimony, though — not wi' the likes o' you. Come, you clear out o' this; and don't you never go for to show your ugly mug here again, or my cluster o' five will soon be no stranger to it, I promise you!'

He held up a colossal hand as he spoke, first extending the fingers in illustration of his threat, and then clenching it into a redoubtable fist.

Andrew sat upright in the elbow-chair, his expressionless eyes staring stolidly at his assailant, but without attempting to move. Through the open door the sound of whispers and titters could have been heard had either of the men been in a condition to notice such trivial matters.

'Now, then!' repeated Sharpe threateningly.

Andrew Burge drew himself up.

'This contumacious behaviour, Mr. Sharpe, sir,' he said, 'has no effect upon me whatever. My intentions is to make an equivocal offer of marriage to Mrs. Fiander, and from her lips alone will I take my answer. I shall sit in this chair,' he continued firmly, 'until the lady comes in person to give me her responsory.'

'You will, will ye?' bellowed Isaac. 'Ye be a-goin' to sit there, be ye? Ye bain't, though! That there chair's my chair I'd have ye know, and I'll soon larn ye who have got the right to sit in it.'

With that he lunged forward, thrusting the 'cluster of five' so suddenly into Andrew's face that that gentleman threw himself heavily backwards, and the chair, being unprovided with castors, overbalanced, and fell violently to the ground.

Undeterred by the catastrophe and the

peculiar appearance presented by Mr. Burge's flushed and dazed countenance as he stared helplessly upwards, contemplating probably a thousand stars, Isaac seized the chair by the legs and began to drag it across the floor, bumping its occupant unmercifully in his exertions. His own countenance was, indeed, almost as purple in hue as Andrew's by the time he reached the door, which was obligingly thrown open as he neared it, revealing Sam Belbin's delighted face. The alarmed countenances of the maids peered over his shoulder, while a few manly forms were huddled together in the passage. Mr. Sharpe's extremely audible tones had attracted many eager listeners; nothing so exciting had taken place at Littlecomb since Elias Fiander's funeral.

'Here, you chaps,' cried the farmer, still tugging violently at the chair, and panting with his efforts; 'here, come on, some on you. Lend a hand to get rid o' this here carcase.'

Nothing loath, the men sprang forward, and between them the chair with its occupant was dragged out of the room and along the passage.

'What's he been a-doin' of?' inquired Sam with great gusto, as he dropped his particular chair-leg on the cobble-stones in the yard.

'Never you mind what he've been a-doin'

of,' returned Isaac, straightening himself and wiping his brow. 'Get him out of that there chair, and trot him off the premises — that's what you've a-got to do.'

Andrew Burge was with some difficulty set on his legs, and after gazing vacantly round him appeared to recover a remnant of his scattered senses.

'I'll summons you, Mr. Sharpe,' he cried. 'The liberties of the British subject is not to be vi'lently interfered with! I leave this spot,' he added, looking round loftily but unsteadily, 'with contumely!'

Anyone who had subsequently seen Sam and Robert conducting the suitor to the high road would have endorsed the truth of this remark, though Mr. Burge, according to his custom, had merely used the first long word that occurred to him without any regard to its appropriateness.

Returning to the house, Isaac went to the foot of the stairs and called out Rosalie's name in a mildly jubilant roar.

'Come down, Mrs. Fiander; come down, my dear! He be gone, and won't never trouble you no more, I'll answer for't.'

Rosalie came tripping downstairs, smiling, in spite of a faintly alarmed expression.

'What a noise you did make, to be sure!' she remarked; 'and what a mess the parlour is in!'

'We did knock down a few things, I d' 'low, when we was cartin' 'en out of this,' returned Isaac apologetically. 'He was a-settin' in my chair, and he up and told me to my face as he 'd go on a-settin' there till he seed 'ee — that were comin' it a bit too strong!'

He was helping her as he spoke to pick up the scattered furniture, and to restore the table-cloth and books, which Andrew had dragged down in falling, to their places.

These tasks ended, he faced her with a jovial smile.

'Well,' he said, 'he won't trouble you again, anyhow. There 's one o' your coortin' chaps a-gone for good.'

'I wish you could get rid of them all in the same way,' said Rosalie gratefully; adding in a confidential tone, 'there 's Mr. Wilson, now — he keeps calling and calling, and he follows me about, and pays me compliments — he is very tiresome.'

'Be he?' returned the farmer with a clouded brow. 'Ah, and he bain't a chap for you to be takin' notice on, nohow. I 'd give 'en the sack if I was you.'

'Why, you see, I don't like to be rude; and he was kind about the pigs. But I wish some one would drop him a hint that he is wasting his time in dangling about me.'

She broke off suddenly, for at that moment the interested and excited countenance of Sam Belbin appeared in the doorway, and, though he was a favourite with his mistress, she did not see fit to discuss such intimate affairs in his hearing.

The news of Isaac Sharpe's encounter with young Andrew Burge soon flew round the neighbourhood, evoking much comment, and causing constructions to be placed upon the farmer's motives which, if he had heard them, would have sorely disquieted that good man.

'He be a-goin' to coort Widow Fiander hisself, for certain,' averred Mrs. Paddock. 'D'ye mind how I did say that day as there was all the trouble yonder at Littlecomb — "How nice," says I, "master did speak of her!" — d'ye mind? He were quite undone about her. "Pore young creatur'," says he, so feelin' as he could. "D'ye mind? Mrs. Belbin," I said, says I, "master be a very feelin' man."'

'Ah, I can mind as you said that,' returned Mrs. Belbin; 'but my Sam he d' 'low as Mrs.

Fiander would n't so much as look at master. "Not another old man," says he. And, mind ye,' added Mrs. Belbin, confidentially dropping her voice, 'Sam's missus do think a deal o' he.'

Mrs. Paddock folded her arms, and looked superciliously at her neighbour.

'Nay now,' said she, 'your Sam 'ull find hisself mistook if he gets set on sich a notion as that.'

'What notion?' returned the other innocently. 'I never said nothin' about no notion at all. You 've a-got such a suspectin' mind, Mrs. Paddock, there 's no tellin' you a bit o' news wi'out you up an' take a body's character away.'

At this moment the impending hostilities between the two matrons were averted by the advent of a third — Mrs. Stuckhey by name, wife of Robert Stuckhey, who worked at Littlecomb.

'My 'usband did say,' she remarked, negligently scratching her elbows, 'as Mr. Sharpe seemed very intimate wi' missus. "My dear," he says to her. Ah, Stuckhey d' say as Mr. Sharpe do often call missus "my dear." And he did say as he seed 'en come walkin' home wi' her this arternoon, quite lovin' like, in a

smock-frock, jist the same as if he was in his own place. "Go upstairs, my dear," says he ——'

'In his *smock-frock?*' interrupted Mrs. Paddock eagerly. 'Were it a new smock-frock, did Mr. Stuckhey say?'

'Very like it were,' replied Mrs. Stuckhey, accommodatingly. 'My master he bain't one as takes much notice, and if it had a-been a old one he 'd scarce ha' thought o' mentionin' it to me.'

'Then you may depend, Mrs. Belbin,' cried Mrs. Paddock triumphantly, 'as master be a-coortin' o' Widow Fiander! A new smock-frock! 't is the very thing as a man like he 'ud wear when his thoughts was bent on sich matters! I do mind as my father told me often how he did save an' save for eleven weeks to buy hisself a new smock to go a-coortin' my mother in. Ah, wages was terrible low then, and he were n't a-gettin' above seven shillin' a week; but he did manage to put by a shillin' out o' that. The smock — it were a white 'un — did cost eleven shillin', and he did save eleven weeks. And, strange to say, when he and my mother did wed, they did have eleven children.'

Utterly routed by this incontrovertible testi-

mony, Mrs. Belbin withdrew to her own quarters, leaving the other two ragged heads bobbing together in high enjoyment of the delectable piece of gossip.

Before the morrow the entire village knew that Farmer Sharpe had arrived at Littlecomb with his arm round Widow Fiander's waist, that he had spoken to her in the tenderest terms, had avowed his intention of hammering each and every one of her suitors, and had bought himself a brand-new and beautifully embroidered smock-frock for the express purpose of courting her in it.

CHAPTER X

> Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
> Misprising what they look on . . . . .
>
> SHAKESPEARE.

THOUGH Isaac Sharpe did not consider himself bound to assist Rosalie in repelling the advances of Mr. Wilson, the auctioneer, the wish she had expressed that someone would be kind enough to 'drop a hint to him' had fallen upon other attentive and willing ears.

Sam Belbin had laid her words to heart, and only waited for an opportunity of proving his good-will by ridding her of a frequent and unwelcome visitor.

His chance came at last, and he was quick to take advantage of it.

It was cheese-day, and Rosalie and her maids had prepared such a quantity that their work was not, as usual, finished before dinner-time, and they were still elbow-deep in curds when Mr. Wilson chanced to look in.

Sam was standing in the outer room, swilling out the great cheese-vat which had held

that morning a hundred and eighty gallons of skim-milk. A wonderfully obliging fellow was Sam, always ready to lend a hand here, to do an odd job there; and so good-tempered with it all. His mistress could often see his smiling mouth open and ready to agree with whatever remark he thought her likely to make long before she had spoken; and as she liked contradiction as little as any of her sex her head-man advanced the more rapidly in her favour.

She was anything but gratified when Mr. Wilson appeared on the threshold of the milk-house, and after a brief greeting bent her head over her mould and went on with her work.

'Always busy, Mrs. Fiander,' remarked the visitor pleasantly. ''Pon my word, you ladies put us to shame sometimes. We men are idle creatures in comparison with you.'

Rosalie made no answer, and Sam banged about the vat with his stiff brush so energetically that he seemed bent on giving the lie to the auctioneer's words.

'I am really quite curious to see how you set about your cheese-making,' pursued the latter in mellifluous tones. 'Should I be in

your way, Mrs. Fiander, if I was to step in and watch you?'

'I am afraid you would n't find it very amusing,' responded Rosalie unwillingly. 'Of course, if you like. But it will really be most uncomfortable for you. We are all in such a mess here. Sam'—irritably—'what a din you do make with that tub!'

Sam, who had tilted up the tub, the better apparently to scrub the bottom, now let it go suddenly, sending a great portion of its contents splashing across the floor in Mr. Wilson's direction.

'It be all the same,' he remarked philosophically; 'I were just a-goin' to swill out this here place.'

And with that he upset a little more of the steaming water upon the floor, seized a stiff broom, and began to brush the soapy liquid towards the door.

'You might have waited a moment,' commented his mistress; but she spoke with a sweet smile, for she saw with the corner of her eye how hastily Mr. Wilson had skipped out of the way, anxious to protect his shining boots and immaculate leggings. 'I really cannot invite you in now,' she added, turning to the visitor regretfully. 'Pray excuse the

man's awkwardness.' But as she spoke she smiled again on Sam.

She related the anecdote with much gusto to Isaac Sharpe on the following Sunday, but he did not seem to appreciate it as much as she had expected.

'That there Wilson, he's arter you too, I suppose. I would n't have anything to say to him if I was you. He bain't steady enough to make a good husband — racin' an' drinkin', and sich-like. Ah, his poor wife, she did n't praise him, but she suffered, poor soul!'

'Gracious, Mr. Sharpe, I am sure you need n't warn me! You know what my views are; besides, I hate the man. I would n't see him at all if he had n't — had n't been rather obliging in a business-way. But was n't it clever of Sam to get rid of him like that?'

''Ees,' agreed the farmer dubiously; 'but don't 'ee go for to let 'en take too much on hisself, my dear, else ye 'll be like to repent it. It do never do to let these young fellows get sot up. Keep 'en in his place, Mrs. Fiander; don't let 'en get presumptious.'

'I 'm sure he would never be that,' she rejoined warmly. 'Poor Sam; he's the humblest creature in the world. He goes about his work like — like a machine.'

'May be so,' said Isaac incredulously; 'you know him best, I suppose, but I jist thought I 'd speak my mind out about him.'

Rosalie frowned a little and said no more, but her faith in Sam was not diminished, and as time went on she grew to rely more and more on this cheerful and obliging young fellow.

The gossiping anent the alleged courting of Mrs. Fiander by Farmer Sharpe was not confined to Littlecomb Village, but soon spread to the more important town of Branston, with the immediate result of stirring up sundry of the young men belonging to that place, who, after the discomfiture of Samuel Cross, had deemed it prudent to relax for a time in their attentions to the fascinating widow. So long as she had been thought plunged in grief, these wooers of hers had been content to bide their time; but when it became known that there was actually an avowed suitor in the field, and one, moreover, to whom the lady had given unequivocal tokens of confidence and good-will, they resolved with one accord to bestir themselves, lest the prize of which each thought himself most deserving, might be secured by another.

Before many days of the new year had

passed Rosalie found herself absolutely besieged. Samuel Cross actually forced his way past the unwilling Susan into the parlour while Rosalie was at tea; Mr. Wilson lay in wait for her as she was emerging from church on Christmas Day, and made his proposal in due form as he escorted her homewards. John Hardy inveigled the widow into the back parlour behind the shop, ostensibly to discuss the sale of the Blue Vinneys, in reality to lay his hand and heart at her feet.

Rosalie said 'No' to one and all, and was astonished at the outburst of indignation which her answer provoked, and at the keen sense of ill-usage under which every one of her suitors appeared to be labouring.

It was Samuel Cross who first alluded in Rosalie's hearing to the prevalent belief that Farmer Sharpe was paying his court to her; and he was somewhat taken aback by the unfeigned merriment which the suggestion evoked.

'You may laugh, Mrs. Fiander,' he said, recovering himself after an instant, 'but people are not blind and deaf; and, though they may be fooled to a certain extent by a lady, gentlemen of my profession find it easy to put two and two together, ma'am. When a lady tells

you she is always engaged on a Sunday, and shuts the door in the face of a person who comes to make civil inquiries, one does n't need to be extra clever to guess that there must be some reason for it. And when the reason turns out to be another gentleman, and when that gentleman takes upon himself to assault another gentleman as was also desirous of paying his respects in the same quarter, *that*, Mrs. Fiander, is what one may term *primâ-facie* evidence!'

Whether the display of Mr. Cross's learning had a sobering effect on Mrs. Fiander, or whether she was suddenly struck by some serious thought, it is certain that she ceased laughing at this juncture, and remained pensive even after the rejected suitor had departed.

Mr. Wilson was harder to get rid of. He was so confident in the justice of his claim, so pertinacious in reminding Rosalie of her obligations towards him with regard to the sales of the pigs — which piece of business he perseveringly alluded to as 'a delicate matter' — so persuaded, moreover, of his own superiority to any of her other lovers, that she finally lost patience and petulantly declared that if there were not another man in the world she would not consent to marry him.

The auctioneer grew purple in the face, and suddenly changed his note: —

'If there was n't another man in the world!' he repeated sneeringly. 'Then there is another man? Ha! it is n't very hard to guess who! Well, tastes differ. If you like such a rough, common old chap better than a gentleman doing a large and honourable business, I make you a present of him, Mrs. Fiander, smock-frock and all! Ha, ha, *he'll* soon have the pigs back again when he's master here, and all my labour and loss of time will have been thrown away. Not that I grudge the sacrifice,' cried Mr. Wilson in a melting tone. 'No, far be it from me to grudge the sacrifice. The ladies have always found an easy prey in me; and when I think of the far greater sacrifice which a young and lovely woman is prepared to make upon the altar of matrimony — a sacrifice which she will repent too late — I am rejooced to silence.'

Here Mr. Wilson thumped his breast and cast a last languishing look at the young widow, who appeared, however, to be absorbed in her own reflections.

He talked on in spite of his last assertion until they reached Rosalie's door, where, wak-

ing as if from a dream, she extended her hand to him.

'Good-bye,' she said. 'There is no use in talking about it any more, Mr. Wilson; my mind is made up.'

The auctioneer extended his hand dramatically in the direction of the empty pigsties.

'Well, Mrs. Fiander,' he cried, 'if the Inspector of Nuisances visits your premises you will only have yourself to thank.'

'Meanwhile,' retorted Rosalie with some acerbity, 'as it might be a little difficult to send for him to-day, I should be glad if the nuisance who is now occupying my premises would take himself off.'

She went into the house with a flushed face, but seemed more thoughtful than annoyed during the remainder of the day.

It was, however, with unmixed vexation that she perused, on the morning following her rejection of young John Hardy, a document signed by the firm, which ran thus: —

'To Mrs. Fiander.

'Madam, — *Re* Blue Vinney Cheeses. — We regret to inform you that we can no longer allow our premises to be used as a storehouse for these unsaleable articles. In the three months during which, in order to oblige you, we have placed our

establishment at your disposal, we have only found one purchaser for a small portion of the goods in question (as you will see per statement copied from our books and enclosed herewith). Under these circumstances we are returning to you to-day as many of the cheeses as the carrier's cart can convey, and we shall be obliged by your removing the remainder at your earliest convenience.

'We are, Madam, yours obediently,

'HARDY & SON.'

The enclosed 'statement' testified to the purchase by one Margaret Savage of $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. Blue Vinney C^se^ at $5\frac{3}{4}$ *d.* = 4*d.*, which sum had been credited to Mrs. Fiander's account.

Rosalie gave a little gasp, and tears of vexation sprang to her eyes.

'They just want to spite me,' she said. 'Of course the cheeses are hardly fit for use yet — they can't have even tried to dispose of them; they simply pretended to sell them so as to entrap me, and now they are throwing them back on my hands before I have time to think what to do with them. That odious John Hardy! Mean-spirited wretch — it is all his doing!'

Even as she thus cogitated there was a rattling of wheels without, and the carrier's cart drew up with a flourish at the door.

'Please, ma'am,' cried Susan, thrusting in her head, 'Mr. Smith be here with ever so many cheeses as he says Hardys are sending back; and there 's sixteen-and-eightpence to pay; and he says, ma'am, will you please send the men to unload them at once?'

'Call Sam,' said her mistress in a strangled voice. 'Tell him to come at once with two or three of the others, and to take the cheeses carefully upstairs.'

'Why, the cheese-room be a'most full, ma'am. I doubt there 'll not be much room for them there. We was waitin', you know, till Christmas had gone over a bit to send the last load to town.'

'Pile them up in the dairy, then, for the present. Well, why don't you go?' she cried, irritably, as the girl remained staring at her. 'Make the men get to work at once while I find my purse.'

As she came down from her room, purse in hand, she observed through the staircase window the blank faces of Sam and his underlings, as the carrier tossed the cheeses to them from the cart, grinning the while as though at some excellent joke. She stamped her foot, and caught her breath with a little angry sob. She had been so proud in despatching

to Branston load after load of these fine round cheeses, she had often congratulated herself on the wisdom and cleverness of this expedient of hers — and now to have them ignominiously thrown back at her without having even disposed of one — to be turned into a laughing-stock for her own folks as well as for the whole town of Branston; to be actually made to pay for the ill-success of her experiment! Rosalie was as a rule open-handed and generous enough, but the disbursal of this particular sixteen-and-eightpence caused her a pang of almost physical anguish.

Half an hour later, when the carrier had departed and the men returned to their work, she entered the dairy, and stood gazing with clasped hands and a melancholy countenance at the heaps of despised Blue Vinneys which were piled up on every side.

To her presently came Sam Belbin, his arms dangling limply by his sides, his expression duly composed to sympathetic gloom.

'Oh, Sam!' exclaimed Rosalie in a heart-broken tone, pointing tragically to the nearest yellow mound.

'I would n't take on, I 'm sure, mum,' responded Sam with a ghastly smile. 'Nay now, I would n't take on. 'T was very ill

done o' Mr. Hardy — so everybody do say, but he 's that graspin' — he never do care for sellin' a bit o' cheese to poor folks — 't is all *bacon, bacon* wi' he! "Don't 'ee go for to fill your stummicks wi' that there 'ard cheese," I 've a-heard him say myself. "Buy a bit o' bacon as 'ull stand to ye hot or cold."'

'Bacon!' ejaculated Rosalie with a note of even deeper woe. Then, pointing to the cheeses again, she groaned: 'Oh, Sam, was it worth while getting rid of the pigs — for this?'

'Dear heart alive, mum,' responded Belbin, plucking up his courage, and speaking more cheerfully. 'Mr. Hardy bain't the only grocer in Branston! There be a-many more as 'ud be proud an' glad to sell them cheeses for ye.'

'No, no. Why, the story must be all over the town by now — no one will look at them in Branston. Everyone will know that Mr. Hardy packed them back to me. No, if I sell them at all I must send them away somewhere — to Dorchester, perhaps.'

'Well, and that 'ud be a good notion, mum,' commented Belbin. 'You 'd get a better price for them there, I d' 'low. Lard! At Dorchester the Blue Vinney cheeses do go off like smoke.'

'There is always a sale for them there, to be sure,' said Rosalie, somewhat less lugubriously.

'And our own horses and carts 'ud take them there in less than no time,' pursued Sam, more and more confidently. 'Things have just fell out lucky. It be a-goin' to take up to-night, and I d' 'low there 'll be some sharpish frostiss — 't will just exercise the horses nicely, to get them roughed and make 'em carry them cheeses to Dorchester — 't will be the very thing as 'ull do them good. And it 'll cost ye nothing,' he added triumphantly.

'Well, Sam, you are a good comforter,' cried his mistress, brightening up under the influence of his cheerfulness. ''T is a blessing, I am sure, to have someone about one who does n't croak.'

She turned to him as she spoke with one of her radiant smiles — a smile, however, which very quickly vanished, for Sam's face wore a most peculiar expression.

'Why, my dear!' he cried, casting an ardent look upon her, 'I be main glad to hear ye say so! I 'd ax nothin' better nor to be about ye always; an' I 'd comfort an' do for ye so well as I could. 'T is a thing,' he added, with modest candour, 'as I 've a-had in my

mind for some time, but I did n't like to speak afore. I was n't sure as ye 'd relish the notion. But now as you 've a-hinted so plain——'

Rosalie had averted her face for a moment, but as he advanced towards her with extended arm, she flashed round upon him a glance which suddenly silenced him.

He remained staring at her with goggling eyes and a dropping jaw during the awful pause which succeeded.

He heaved a sigh of relief, however, when she at last broke silence, for she spoke calmly, and her words seemed innocuous enough.

'Is that your coat hanging up behind the door?'

'Yes, mum,' responded Sam, no longer the lover but the very humble servant.

'Go and get it then. Your cap, I think, is on the table.'

She fumbled in her pocket for a moment, and presently drew forth her purse, from which she counted out the sum of fourteen shillings. Her eyes had a steely glitter in them as she fixed them on Sam.

'Here are your week's wages,' she said. 'Take them, and walk out of this house.'

'Mum,' pleaded Sam piteously. 'Missus——!'

'Go out of this house,' repeated Rosalie, pointing mercilessly to the door; 'and never let me see your face again. Out of my sight!' she added quickly, as he still hesitated.

Sam's inarticulate protests died upon his lips, and he turned and left her, Rosalie looking after him with gleaming eyes until his figure was lost to sight.

CHAPTER XI

Follow a shadow, it still flies you,
Seem to fly it, it will pursue:
So court a mistress, she denies you;
Let her alone she will court you.
Say, are not women truly, then,
Styled but the shadows of us men?

BEN JONSON.

Who by resolves and vows engag'd does stand
For days that yet belong to Fate,
Does, like an unthrift, mortgage his estate
Before it falls into his hand.

ABRAHAM COWLEY.

ISAAC SHARPE, receiving no answer to his knock, walked straight into the parlour. The room was dark save for the smouldering glow of the fire, and it was some time before he discovered Rosalie's figure huddled up in Elias's chair.

'Why, what be to do?' he inquired, stooping over her.

'Oh, Mr. Sharpe,' returned she, with a strangled sob, 'I have had such a day—I have been so insulted. Oh, how shall I ever forget it! What can I have done to bring about such a thing!'

'Come,' cried the farmer, much alarmed, 'whatever is it, my dear? Out wi' it; and let 's have some light to see ourselves by.'

With that he seized the poker and stirred the logs on the hearth, until they flared up with a brightness almost painful to Rosalie's aching eyes. He saw the traces of tears upon her flushed face, and his concern increased.

'I heard ye was in trouble again,' he said, 'and I thought I 'd look in — Them cheeses as ye 've been a-making of ever since midsummer is back on your hands, they tell me.'

'Yes,' said Rosalie faintly. 'There are piles and piles of them in the dairy; and Mr. Hardy wrote a most ill-natured letter about them, and everyone in the place will think me a fool. But it is n't that I mind so much — I shall sell those cheeses somewhere, I suppose, and I know Mr. Hardy only sent them back out of spite because I would n't marry John ——'

'Ah,' put in Isaac, interested; 'John Hardy axed ye, did he? And you would n't have 'en?'

'Of course not,' she returned petulantly.

'Well, Mrs. F.,' said Isaac, leaning forward in his chair, and speaking solemnly, 'ye mid ha' done worse nor take him. 'T is in my mind,' he went on emphatically, 'as soon or

late ye 'll have to take a second. But, tell me, what was it as upset ye so much to-day?'

'I am almost ashamed to say it. Sam Belbin — you know Sam, that common lad that I made cowman out of pure kindness and because I thought him faithful — he — he — that lout, has actually dared to make love to me!'

'Well, now,' commented Isaac, nodding.

'Are you not amazed? Did you ever hear of such impudence? He dared to call me "my dear"; and he seemed to think that *I*, his mistress, had actually encouraged him! He said something about my dropping a hint. But I soon let him see what I thought of him. I packed him off on the moment!'

'Did ye?' said Isaac. 'Well, my dear — I beg pardon — Mrs. Fiander, I should say ——'

'Oh, of course,' she put in quickly, 'I don't mind *your* saying *my dear* — 't is a very different matter.'

'Well, as I was a-sayin',' pursued the farmer, ignoring these niceties, 'I bain't altogether so very much surprised. I 've a-heard some queer talk about you and Sam Belbin — only this very day I 've a-heard queer talk — and, to say the truth, that were the reason why

I looked in this arternoon — I thought it best not to wait till Sunday. I 'm not one to meddle, but I thought it only kind to let ye know what folks in the village be sayin'.'

'Mr. Sharpe!' — and her eyes positively blazed — 'do you mean to tell me that people know me so little as to gossip about me and that low fellow?'

'Ah, my dear,' cried Isaac, catching the infection of her excitement, 'there's no knowing what folks do say — they be ready to believe any scandelious thing. Why, Bithey did actually tell me 't is common talk o' the village as you and me be a-goin' to make a match of it.'

Rosalie, who had been leaning forward in her chair, suddenly sank back; she drew a long breath, and then said in a very small voice:

'Well, Isaac, I believe it will have to come to that.'

Not even Sam Belbin, withering under his mistress's scornful gaze, had stared at her with such blank dismay as that now perceptible on Farmer Sharpe's face.

Rosalie covered her own with both hands, but presently dropped them again.

'Everything points to it,' she said firmly. 'You see yourself things cannot go on as they

are. I find I can't manage the men——' Here her voice broke, but she pursued after a minute: 'Even the work which I am competent to undertake has not succeeded. Elias would be sorely grieved to see everything going wrong like this, he who was such a good man of business — always so regular and particular.'

'Ah,' groaned Isaac, 'I d' 'low, it 'ud very near break his heart.'

'There must be a master here,' went on Rosalie. 'Even you were forced to own just now that I ought to marry again.'

''Ees,' agreed Isaac unwillingly, 'oh, 'ees, it 'ud be a very good thing; but I——'

He broke off, gazing at her with an expression almost akin to terror.

'Do you suppose for a moment,' she cried with spirit, 'that I would ever consent to put a stranger in my dear Elias's place? Could you — you who have been his friend so long, bear to see one of the Branston counter-jumpers master here? I wonder at you, Isaac Sharpe!'

'Nay now,' protested the farmer; 'I did n't say I wished no such thing, Mrs. Fiander. I said 't was my opinion as you 'd be forced to take a second, and you might do worse nor think o' John Hardy.'

'Pray, is n't he a counter-jumper?' interrupted Rosalie vehemently.

'Well, there 's others besides he,' returned Sharpe weakly.

'Whom would you choose, then?' cried she. 'Wilson, to drink, and race away my husband's hard-earned money? Andrew Burge, perhaps, whom you drove out of this house with your own hands? Or that little ferret-faced Samuel Cross — he 'd know how to manage a dairy-farm, would n't he? You 'd like to see him strutting about, and giving orders here? I tell you what it is, Isaac Sharpe, if you have no respect for dear Elias's memory, you should be glad that I have.'

'Who says I have n't respect for 'Lias's memory?' thundered Isaac, now almost goaded into a fury. 'I 've known 'en a deal longer nor you have, Widow Fiander, and there 's no one in this world as thought more on him. All I says is — I bain't a marryin' man — 'Lias knowed I were n't never a marryin' man. I don't believe,' added Isaac, with an emphatic thump on the table, 'I don't believe as if 'Lias were alive he 'd expect it of me.'

'But he 's dead, you see,' returned Rosalie with a sudden pathetic change of tone — 'he 's dead, and that is why everything is going

wrong. I should n't think of making a change myself if I did n't feel it was the only thing to do. You loved Elias; you knew his ways; you would carry on the work just as he used to do — it would n't be like putting a stranger in his place. I would n't do it if I could help it,' she added, sobbing; 'but I think we — we should both try to do our duty by Elias.'

Isaac, visibly moved, rolled his eyes towards her and heaved a mighty sigh.

'Of course, if you put it that way,' he began; and then his courage failed him, and be became once more mute.

'It would n't be such a bad thing for you, Mr. Sharpe,' went on Rosalie faintly. ''T is a very fine farm, and a good business. It would be convenient for you to work the two farms together. You 'd have quite a large property — and this is a very comfortable house.'

'Ah,' agreed Isaac, ''t is a good house, but I have n't no need for two houses. I 'm content wi' the one where I were born.'

'Oh, but that won't do at all,' cried Rosalie with sudden animation; 'you would have to live here — the object of my marrying you would be that you should live here.'

'I 've a-lived in my own house ever sin' I

were born,' said the farmer obstinately, 'and when a man weds he takes his wife to live wi' him.'

'Not when the wife has got the best house of the two,' retorted Mrs. Fiander.

'A man can't live in two houses,' asserted Isaac; adding, after a pause: 'What would ye have me do with mine, then?'

'You could put your head-man to live in it,' returned she, 'paying you rent, of course. Or you could let it to somebody else — you would make money in that way.'

One by one Isaac's entrenchments were being carried: no resource remained open to him but to capitulate or to take flight. He chose the latter alternative.

''T is not a thing as a body can make up his mind to in a hurry,' he said. 'I must think it over, Mrs. Fiander.'

Then before she could make the sharp retort which had risen to her lips he had darted to the door.

As it closed behind him Rosalie sprang to her feet, and began to pace hastily about the room. What had she done? She had actually in so many words made an offer of marriage to Isaac Sharpe — and she was not quite sure of being accepted! There was the rub!

Elias was an old man, yet he had wooed her, in her homeless, penniless condition, with a certain amount of ardour. In her widowhood she had been courted, doubtless as much on account of her wealth as of her beauty, but certainly with no lack of eagerness. And now, when she had turned with affectionate confidence to this old friend, and practically laid herself, her good looks, and good fortune at his feet, he had promised unwillingly to think it over. It was not to be endured—she would send him to the right-about on his return, let his decision be what it might. But then came the sickening remembrance of the failures and humiliations which had attended her unassisted enterprises; the importunities of distasteful suitors—worst of all, the confident leer on Sam Belbin's face. Great Heavens! What a miserable fate was hers! She dared not so much as trust a servant but he must needs try to take advantage of her unprotected condition.

The lamp was lit and tea set forth, but Rosalie left it untasted upon the table. She was still pacing restlessly about the room when Isaac walked in; this time without any preliminary knock.

He closed the door behind him and ad-

vanced towards the young woman, his face wearing a benign if somewhat sheepish smile.

'I be come to tell you,' he said, 'as I've come round to the notion.'

He paused, beaming down at her with the air of a man who was making an indubitably pleasant announcement; and Rosalie, who was gifted with a very genuine sense of humour, could not for the life of her help laughing.

''Ees,' repeated Isaac valiantly. 'I've a-comed round to the notion. I was al'ays a bit shy o' materimony, by reason o' the cat-and-dog life as my mother and father did lead; but I d' 'low as I've no need to be fearful about you. You're made different, my dear; and ye've been a good wife to 'Lias. What's more,' he went on cheerfully, 'as I was a-thinkin' to myself, 't is n't same as if I was to go and put myself in the wrong box, so to speak, by beggin' and prayin' of ye to have me; then ye mid very well cast up at me some day if I was n't *satisfied* wi' the bargain. But when a young woman comes and axes a man as a favour to marry her it be a different story, bain't it?'

Rosalie stopped laughing and glanced at him indignantly.

'If that's the way in which you look at it, Mr. Sharpe,' she said, 'I think we had better give up the idea. How dare you,' she burst out suddenly—'how dare you tell me to my face that I asked you as a favour? I am not the kind of person to pray and beseech you. You know as well as I do that other people are ready to fall on their knees if I but hold up a finger.'

'Ah, a good few of them are,' agreed Isaac dispassionately; 'but ye don't want 'em, ye see. Well, and at the first go off, when I was took by surprise, so to speak, I thought I did n't want you. Not as I've any personal objections to you,' he added handsomely, 'but because I never reckoned on changing my state. But now, as I've a-thought it over, I'm agreeable, my dear.'

Rosalie remained silent, her eyes downcast, her hands nervously clasping and unclasping each other.

'I'm willin',' he went on, 'to do my dooty by 'Lias and my dooty by you, Rosalie. You've been a good wife to he, and ye'll be the same to me, I've no doubt.'

He paused, passing his hand meditatively over his grizzled locks and probably comforting himself with the reflection that in this

case at least there would be no need to supply himself with such a box as that so often dolefully shown to him by his father.

'I want to do my duty by Elias,' said the poor young widow at last, in a choked voice, 'but I don't want you to sacrifice yourself, since you feel it is a sacrifice. If you hate me so much don't marry me, Isaac,' she added passionately.

'Lard, my dear, who ever said I hated 'ee? Far from it! I do like 'ee very much; I've liked 'ee from the first. 'Lias knowed I liked 'ee. Say no more about a sacrifice; it bain't no sacrifice to speak on. I was real upset to see how bad you was a-gettin' on, an' it 'll be a comfort to think as I can look arter you, and look arter the place. You and me was al'ays the best o' friends, and we 'll go on bein' the best o' friends when we are man and wife. I can't say no fairer than that.'

He stretched out his large brown palm, and Rosalie laid her cold fingers in it, and the compact was concluded by a silent hand-shake.

Then Isaac, who was a practical man, pointed out to Rosalie that her tea was growing cold, and remarked placidly that he would smoke a bit of a pipe by the fire while she partook of it.

As she approached the table and began tremulously to fill her cup he drew forward a chair and sat down.

Rosalie glanced round at him and started; the new era had already begun. Isaac was sitting in Elias's chair!

PART II

THE PRINCE

PART II

THE PRINCE

CHAPTER I

'Mong blooming woods, at twilight dim,
The throstle chants with glee, O!
But the plover sings his evening hymn
To the ferny wild so free, O!
Wild an' free!
Wild an' free!
Where the moorland breezes blow!

EDWIN WAUGH.

L'amour nous enlève notre libre-arbitre: on peut choisir ses amitiés, mais on subit l'amour. PRINCESSE KARADJA.

ONE lovely sparkling April day a man was slowly pushing his bicycle up a certain steep incline which is situated a little way out of Dorchester, and which is known as Yellowham Hill.

The road climbed upwards between woods, the banks on either side being surmounted by a dense growth of rhododendrons and gorse, the latter in full bloom, its brilliant yellow contrasting with the glossy dark leaves of the

bushes behind, which were already covered with a myriad of buds, and the little bronze crooks of the bracken curling upwards through the moss beneath.

The long spring day wanted yet some hours of its close, but already delicious spicy odours came forth from the woods, which spoke of falling dew; and the birds were making mysterious rustlings in the boughs, as though preparing to go to roost.

The young man paused every now and then to draw a long breath, and to look round him with evident delight.

'This is good,' he said to himself once. 'This is fairyland — the place is full of magic.' Then a sudden change came over his face, and he added: 'It is better than fairyland — it is home.'

He was a pleasant-looking young fellow, with a handsome intelligent face and a tall well-knit figure. He had grey eyes, very alert and keen in their expression, and when he smiled his face lit up in an unexpected and attractive way. His complexion was browner than might have been looked for in connection with his hair, which was not very dark, and he had a certain wideawake air as of one who had seen many men and things.

He had almost reached the crest of the hill when his glance, sweeping appreciatively over the curving bank at the turn of the road, rested upon a woman's figure amid the tangle of sunlit green and gold which crowned it.

Rosalie Fiander—who would be Rosalie Fiander for some three months longer, it having been agreed between her and Isaac that their marriage should not take place till her year's widowhood was completed—had halted here on her return to Branston, after a flying business-visit to Dorchester.

These Yellowham Woods had been much loved by her during her childhood, and she had yielded to the temptation of alighting from the gig to spend a few minutes in what had once been to her a very paradise.

Nigger was placidly cropping the grass at a little distance from her, and she had been on her way to re-enter the vehicle, when she had paused for a last glance round.

She had marked, at first idly, then with some interest, the figure which was toiling up the hill, feeling somewhat embarrassed when she discovered on its nearer approach that she was herself the object of a somewhat unusual scrutiny. The grey eyes which looked at her so intently from out of the brown face had a

very peculiar mixture of expressions. There was curiosity in them and admiration — to that she was accustomed — but there was something more: a wonder, an almost incredulous delight. Thus might a man look upon the face of a very dear friend whom he had not expected to see — thus almost might he meet the sweetheart from whom he had been parted for years.

As he approached the bank he slackened his pace, and presently came to a standstill immediately beneath Rosalie's pinnacle of moss-grown earth.

They remained face to face with each other for a moment or two, Rosalie gazing down, fascinated, at the man's eyes, in which the joyful wonder was growing ever brighter. Rousing herself at last with an effort, and colouring high, she turned and hastened along the crest of the bank until she came to the gig, descended, rapidly gathered up the reins, and mounted into the vehicle.

Seeing that the stranger, though he had begun to walk slowly on, continued to watch her, and being, besides, annoyed and confused at her own temporary embarrassment, she jerked the reins somewhat sharply, and touched up Nigger with the whip. The as-

tonished animal, unaccustomed to such treatment, started off at a brisk pace, and the gig rattled down the steep incline with a speed which would have filled its late owner with horror.

The disaster which he would certainly have prophesied was not long in coming. Nigger's legs were not quite on a par with his mettle, and presently, stumbling over a loose stone, he was unable to recover himself, and dropped fairly and squarely on both knees.

He was up in an instant, but Rosalie, jumping out of the cart, and running to his head, uttered a cry of anguish. Through the white patches of dust which testified to Nigger's misfortune she saw blood trickling. A moment later rapid footsteps were heard descending the hill, and the bicyclist came to her assistance.

Bending forward, he carefully examined Nigger's knees, and then turned to Rosalie; the curious expression which had so puzzled and annoyed her having completely vanished and given place to one of respectful concern.

'Don't be frightened,' he said; 'it is not much — barely skin-deep — I doubt if there will be any marks.'

'He has never been down before,' said she

tearfully. 'Poor Nigger! Good old fellow! I should n't have driven you so fast down the hill.'

'His legs should be attended to at once,' said the stranger practically. 'Have you far to go?'

'Oh yes — sixteen miles. To Branston.'

He darted a keen glance at her.

'Branston,' he echoed. 'I am going there myself to-morrow, or rather I am going to a place about a mile this side of it.'

'Well, I, too, stop a little this side of the town,' said Rosalie. 'But poor Nigger will never get so far. What am I to do? I must get home to-night.'

'There is a village a mile or so from here,' observed the young man. 'I think your best plan would be to leave the horse at the inn there. They would probably lend you another to take you home. If you will get into the trap I will lead the horse slowly back.'

'Oh no, I will walk,' cried Rosalie; 'I can lead him myself,' she added diffidently. 'I don't like to take you out of your way — besides, you have your bicycle. I suppose you are going to Dorchester?'

'I can go to Dorchester any time,' returned he. ''T is merely a fancy of mine that takes

me there. I've a wish to see the old place again, having been away from it for ten years. But I am really on my way to visit my uncle. If you know Branston, I dare say you have met him. He lives near Littlecomb Village, at a place called the Down Farm.'

'Mr. Isaac Sharpe!' ejaculated Rosalie. 'Indeed, I do know him. I live next door to him.'

She broke off, not deeming it necessary to disclose, on so short an acquaintance, her peculiar relations with the person in question.

'Good!' cried the young man gaily. 'It is strange our meeting like this. I am Richard Marshall, his nephew. You live next door to him, you say,' he added, with a puzzled look; 'then you must be — you are ——?'

'I am Mrs. Fiander,' returned she. 'You remember Elias Fiander, of Littlecomb Farm?'

'Of course I do; and I used to know his wife.'

'Oh, you have been so long away that a great many changes have taken place. I was Elias Fiander's third wife.'

'Was?' cried he.

'Yes,' said Rosalie blushing, she knew not why. 'My dear husband died last July.'

The look of blank dismay which had over-

spread the young man's face gave way to an expression of relief; but he made no reply.

Rosalie took hold of the nearest rein, turned Nigger round, and began to lead him slowly up the hill again.

'I can really manage quite well,' she said, somewhat stiffly.

'I must see you out of your difficulties,' returned the other with quiet determination; and he too began to retrace his steps, pausing a moment at the crest of the hill to repossess himself of his bicycle, which he had left propped against the bank.

'I will ride on to the village,' he said, 'and make arrangements about leaving your horse there and getting a fresh one. It will save time, and there is none to spare if you want to get home before dusk.'

He raised his cap, mounted, and disappeared before Rosalie had time to protest.

Indeed, she was glad enough of Richard Marshall's helpful company when she presently arrived at the Black Horse Inn, where, in spite of the framed poetical effusion which hung beneath the sign, and which testified to the merits of the establishment, there was some difficulty in procuring accommodation and attention for poor Nigger, and even greater

in finding a substitute. In fact, the only animal available proved to be a huge raw-boned three-year-old, who was with great difficulty persuaded to enter the shafts of the gig, and who, when harnessed, tilted up the vehicle in such a peculiar manner that Rosalie shrank back in alarm.

'He does n't look safe,' she faltered; 'and I 'm quite sure that boy is n't capable of driving him. I have been shaken by the fright, I suppose, for I feel quite unnerved.'

'I will drive you,' said Richard, with decision, waving aside the lad who had been appointed charioteer and who now began to assert his perfect competence to perform the task. 'I guess I can manage most things in the way of horseflesh; and in any case I intended to go to my uncle's to-morrow.'

'Oh no; I could n't think ——' Rosalie was beginning, when he interrupted her eagerly:

'Nothing will be easier, I assure you; my bag is here, strapped on to my bicycle. I *meant* to take my uncle by surprise — he does n't know I am in England. You can send back the horse to-morrow — even if you took the lad, it would be difficult for him to return to-night. My bicycle can stay here until I

send for it or fetch it. Perhaps I had better get in first, Mrs. Fiander, to keep this wild animal quiet, while you get up. Hand over the reins here — that's it; hold on by his head till the lady mounts. Put that machine of mine in a dry place, will you? Now then, Mrs. Fiander, give me your hand. Whoa, boy! Steady! There we are — Let go!'

He laid the whip lightly on the animal's back, and they were off before Rosalie had had time to protest or to demur.

The long legs of the three-year-old covered the ground in a marvellous manner, and with that tall masterful figure by her side she could feel no fear. Indeed the sensation of swinging along through the brisk air was pleasant enough, though she felt a little uncomfortable at the thought of the astonishment which her arrival in such company would produce at home; and she was, moreover, not quite certain if she relished being thus peremptorily taken possession of by the new-comer. Rosalie was used to think and act for herself and it was quite a new experience to her to have her will gainsaid and her objections overborne, even in her own interests. But, after all, the man was Isaac's nephew, and no one could find fault with her for accepting his assistance.

In a few months' time she would be his aunt — perhaps he would then allow her wishes to have more weight. She smiled to herself as she glanced up at him — what would he say if she told him the relationship which he would shortly bear to her? He would be her nephew. How ridiculous it seemed! He must be some years older than she was; there were firm lines in that brown face, and the hands looked capable and strong, as if they had accomplished plenty of work.

When they reached Yellowham Hill once more and began to descend at a foot's pace, Richard broke silence.

'I have seen and done a good many things in the course of my travels, but I have never come across so beautiful a spot as this, and none of my adventures have been so curious as the one which introduced me to you.'

'Really,' said Rosalie drily; 'I cannot see that there was anything so very extraordinary in it. Even if Nigger had not had this accident we should have been certain to meet while you are staying at Mr. Sharpe's.'

'I wonder,' said the young man, speaking half to himself and half to her — 'I wonder if I should have preferred to meet you first in your own fields — in a cornfield. But the

corn, of course, will not be ripe for months to come. No, on the whole I am content. I said to myself when I was climbing the hill, "There is magic in this place," and I felt it was home.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Rosalie. 'What can it matter where one first meets a new acquaintance, and why should it be in a cornfield?'

'I saw you first in a cornfield,' said he.

'But surely you were not in England last harvest time,' she cried. 'What are you talking about? You have only just said that you would like to *have met* me first in a cornfield, which proves — what is true — that you have never seen me before.'

'I have seen you before,' he murmured in a low voice.

'Nonsense, nonsense,' she cried sharply; 'you must have dreamt it.'

'Yes — I did dream — about you,' he owned, glancing at her; and once more that curious look of wondering joy stole over his face.

Rosalie drew a little away from him in a displeasure which he was quick to observe.

'I will explain some day,' he said, looking down at her with a smile which disarmed her; and then, having reached the bottom of the

hill, he chirruped to the horse, and they sped along once more at an exhilarating pace.

By-and-by he began to talk about his uncle, speaking of him with such evident affection that the heart of the future Mrs. Sharpe warmed to him. Her grateful regard for Isaac had increased during their four months' betrothal. Indeed, it could not have been otherwise: he was so placid, and good-natured, and obliging. Moreover, he took a lot of trouble off her hands, for he had assumed the management of the farm immediately after their engagement. No one could cavil at this arrangement: it was natural that the man who was so shortly to be master should at once take over the control of affairs. Even the gossips of the neighbourhood could make no ill-natured comments; one and all, indeed, agreeing that it was pretty behaviour on the part of the Widow Fiander to postpone the wedding till after the year was out.

So Rosalie listened, well pleased, while Richard spoke of Isaac's past generosity to him and his mother, of the high esteem in which he held him, and of his desire to spend a few weeks in his company before going out into the world afresh.

'Perhaps I ought to tell him that I am

going to marry his uncle,' thought Rosalie, and then she dismissed the notion. Let Isaac make the announcement himself; she felt rather shy about it — and possibly Richard Marshall might not like the idea.

She began to question him, instead, anent his past achievements and future prospects, and heard with astonishment and concern that the young man had not only failed to make his fortune in the distant lands he had visited, but had come back in some ways poorer than he had set out.

'Only in some things, though,' he said. 'I reckon I am richer on the whole.'

'How are you poorer and how are you richer?' queried Rosalie.

'I am poorer in pocket; my uncle sent me out with a nice little sum to start me in life. Ah, as I tell you, he 's a first-rate old chap. He could n't have done more for me if I had been his son. Well, that 's gone long ago, but I have come back richer all the same — rich in experience, for one thing. I have seen a lot and learnt a lot. I educated myself out there in more ways than one. Dear old Dorset holds a very fine place on the map of England, yet 't is but a tiny corner of the world after all.'

As she listened there came to Rosalie a sudden inexplicable envy. She had never been out of her native county — she had never wanted to travel beyond its borders, but for a moment the thought struck her that it might be a fine and desirable thing to see the world.

'I wonder,' she said tartly, for her irritation at this discovery recoiled on its unsuspicious cause — 'I wonder, Mr. Marshall, you should care to come back to Dorset since you have such a poor opinion of it. Why did n't you settle out there?'

'Out where?' he inquired with a smile. 'I have tried to settle in a good many places. I was in a newspaper office in New York — it was while I was there that I did most in the way of educating myself — and then I went to San Francisco, and then to Texas. I 've been pretty well over the States, in fact, and I 've been to Mexico and Brazil and Canada. I might have done well in several places if I could have made up my mind to stick to the job in hand — but I could n't. Something was drawing me all the time — drawing me back to England — drawing me home, so that at last I felt I must come back.'

'And what will you do now?' she inquired with curiosity.

'Oh,' he cried, drawing a deep breath, 'I must work on a farm. The love for farm-work is in my blood, I believe. I want the smell of the fresh-turned earth; I want my arms to be tired heaving the sheaves into the waggons; I want to lead out the horses early in the morning into the dewy fields — I want, oh, many things!'

Rosalie considered him wonderingly: these things were done around her every day as a matter of course, but how curiously the man spoke of them, how unaccountable was that longing of which he spoke! She had never seen anyone the least like him, and, now that the conversation had drifted away from herself, she felt a real pleasure and interest in listening to his talk. As they drove onward through the gathering twilight she, too, was moved to talk, and was charmed by his quick understanding and ready response. Her own wits were quick enough, but she had fallen into the habit of keeping her opinions on abstract subjects to herself: the concrete was all that the people with whom she associated were capable of discussing; and, indeed, they had not much to say on any matter at any time. This young bright personality was something so absolutely new to her, his point

of view so original and vigorous, and his sympathy so magnetic, that Rosalie enjoyed her adventure as she had never enjoyed anything in her life before. Her eyes shone, her cheeks flushed, her merry laugh rang out; she felt that she, too, was young and light-hearted, and that life and youth and gay companionship made a very delightful combination.

As they drew near their destination a sudden silence fell between them, and presently Richard broke it, speaking in a soft and altered tone.

'How familiar the country grows! Even in the dark I recognise a friend at every turn. Is not that your house yonder where the lights are glimmering?'

'Yes,' said Rosalie, with a little unconscious sigh.

'The cornfield where I saw you lies just to the right of it.'

'I wish you would not talk in riddles,' said Rosalie, breathing rather quickly. Through the dusk he could see the wrathful fire in her eyes.

'Do not be angry,' he said quickly; 'I meant to tell you another time when I had come to know you better, but after all why should I not tell you now? I saw a picture of you in

London. I stayed a day or two there on my way through from Liverpool — I had some business to do for a friend in New York — and I went to the Academy, and there, in the very first room, I saw your picture.'

'My picture!' ejaculated she. 'It must have been the one that London gentleman said he would paint.'

'Yes, it was you — you yourself; and you were lying in a cornfield under a shock of wheat, and the corner of your house could just be seen in the distance, and some of the men were reaping a little way off — but you were fast asleep.'

Rosalie's heart was thumping in a most unusual way, and her breath came so pantingly that she did not trust herself to speak.

''T was a big picture,' he said; 'full of sunshine, and when I saw it — the whole thing — the great field stretching away, and the men working, and the quiet old house in the distance, and the girl sleeping so placidly — it was all so glowing, and yet so peaceful and homelike that my heart went out to it. "That 's Dorset," I said, and I believe I cried — I know I felt as if I could cry. After all those years of wandering to find, when I thought myself all alone in a great strange

city, that piece of home smiling at one — I tell you it made one feel queer.'

Rosalie remained silent, angry with herself for the agitation which had taken possession of her.

'So you see I was not quite so far wrong in saying that to-day's meeting was a very strange one. The first instant my eyes fell upon you I recognised you.'

She felt she must say something, but her voice sounded husky and quite unlike itself when she spoke.

'It certainly was odd that we should come across each other near Dorchester. It would of course have been quite natural if you had recognised me when you came to your uncle's.'

'I thought you would have been more interested in my story,' he said reproachfully, after a pause.

'I am — I am very much interested; I think it a very funny story.'

'Funny!' he repeated, and then relapsed into silence, which remained unbroken until they turned in at Rosalie's gate.

CHAPTER II

A thousand thorns, and briers, and stings
I have in my poor breast;
Yet ne'er can see that salve which brings
My passion any rest.

HERRICK.

'WELL, my boy, I be main glad you be come back. There bain't no place like home, be there?'

As Isaac Sharpe repeated these words for the twentieth time since his nephew's arrival, he beamed affectionately upon him through the fragrant steam of the bowl of punch specially brewed in his honour, and then, leaning back in his chair, sighed and shook his head.

'Ye be wonderful like your mother, Richard,' he said, and sighed again, and groaned, and took another sip of punch, blinking the while, partly from the strength of the decoction and partly because he was overcome by emotion.

Richard, sitting opposite to him, stretched out his legs luxuriously to the warmth of the crackling wood fire, and, removing his pipe

from his lips, gazed contentedly round the familiar kitchen, which was now looking its best in the homely radiance.

'It is good to come back to the dear old place and to find everything exactly the same as ever. You don't seem to have grown a day older, Uncle Isaac — nothing is changed. I can't tell you how delightful that is. I had been tormenting myself during the journey with fancying I should find things altered — but, thank Heaven, they are not.'

He glanced brightly at the broad, rubicund face opposite to him, and took his glass from the table.

'Your health, Uncle! May you live a thousand years, and may you be the same at the end of them!'

He half emptied his glass, and set it down with a cheery laugh.

Isaac drank slowly from his, peering meanwhile at his nephew over the rim.

'Thank you, my lad,' he said, replacing it on the table at last. 'I 'm obliged to you, Richard. 'T is kindly meant, but changes, d' ye see' — here he paused and coughed — 'changes, Richard, is what must be looked for in this here world.'

His colour, always sufficiently ruddy, was

now so much heightened, and his face assumed so curiously solemn an expression, that Richard paused with his pipe half-way to his lips and stared at him with amazement and gathering alarm.

'What's the matter?' he said, anxiously. 'Are n't you feeling well? You're looking first-rate.'

'Never felt better in my life,' rejoined his uncle in sepulchral tones.

'Come, that's all right! You quite frightened me. What do you mean by talking about changes?'

Isaac took a gulp from his tumbler and fixed his round eyes dismally on the young man.

'There may be sich things as changes for the better,' he remarked, still in his deepest bass.

'Don't believe in 'em,' cried Richard gaily. 'Don't tell me you're going to turn Methody, or Salvationist, or anything of that kind. I like you as you are — and I don't want you to be any better.'

'Dear heart alive, what notions the chap d' take in his head!' ejaculated the farmer, relaxing into a smile. 'Nay now, I never thought on sich things; but there'll be a change in this here house for all that, Rich-

ard. I be a-goin'' — here Isaac leaned forward, with a hand on either knee, and fixed his eyes earnestly, almost tragically, on his nephew — 'I be a-goin', Richard, for to change my state.'

He slowly resumed an upright position, drawing in his breath through dilated nostrils.

'I be a-goin', Richard,' he continued, observing the other's blank and uncomprehending stare — 'I be a-goin' to get married.'

'Bless me!' exclaimed Richard, taken aback for a moment; then rising from his chair he stepped up to his uncle, and slapped him heartily on the back. 'Well done!' he cried. 'Well done! I give you joy! Upon my life I did n't think you had so much go in you — you 're a splendid old chap!'

'Thank 'ee,' said Isaac, without much enthusiasm. 'I 'm glad you 're not agen it.'

'Why should I be against it?' returned Richard hilariously. 'I 'm a little surprised, because I did n't think that was in your line; but, after all, "Marry in haste and repent at leisure," the saying goes — your case is the reverse; you have taken your time about marrying, so perhaps it will be all the better for you.'

'I hope so, I 'm sure,' said the bridegroom-

elect, dolefully; adding, as Richard, still laughing, resumed his seat, 'I thought I'd best tell 'ee at once as there was goin' to be a change.'

'Well, well, a change for the better, as you say,' cried the other. 'There'll be two to welcome me when I pay the Down Farm a visit instead of one. I shall find a jolly old aunt as well as a jolly old uncle.'

Isaac took his pipe out of his mouth with a perturbed expression.

'She bain't so very old,' he remarked.

'No, no — of course not. Neither are you for that matter. May she be an evergreen like yourself!'

'Thank 'ee, Richard, thank 'ee. I'm glad as you approve o' my thinking on matrimony.'

'Why, matrimony's the best thing going,' said Richard, still gaily, yet with an undercurrent of something curiously like tenderness. 'Every grief is lessened by half, and every joy is doubled. Always a bright cheery face at the fireside, always a kind true hand in yours — a woman's wit to point out where the man has been at fault.'

'Ah,' interrupted his uncle, with a groan, 'they be willin' enough to do that!'

'Always ready to comfort you when you

are in trouble,' went on the young man without heeding him, 'ready to advise you when you are in a difficulty — the best of companions, the most faithful of friends, the kindest of helpmates — that 's a wife!'

The farmer was gazing across at him with bewilderment mixed with delight.

'Well said, Richard, — very well said! Ye be wonderful quick wi' your tongue. If that 's the way ye feel about wedlock you ought to be lookin' out for a wife o' your own.'

'Nonsense, Uncle Isaac. Why, I have n't a penny. I shall have hard work to keep myself to begin with.'

'Come, come, we mid be able to manage summat. I 've a notion in my head. Ye be a-goin' to take up farm-work agen, ye tell me; well, an' as I says to you: Why not work on the farm where ye was brought up, and why not take wage from your own flesh and blood instead of lookin' to strangers for 't?'

'There 's no one I should like to work for better than you, Uncle Isaac — you know that.'

'I do know it, Richard. I d' know it very well. "But," says you to me, "I must have somewheres to live," says you.'

'No, I don't, Uncle Isaac! I say nothing

of the kind,' put in the young man hastily. 'If you intended to remain a bachelor it would be a different matter, but——'

'I 'm not axing you to live wi' me,' returned Isaac, throwing out his hand in a lordly manner. 'If I was a-goin' to keep single it 'ud come nat'ral enough, but my new missus—— Well, 't is this way. She have got a house of her own, and she 's anxious for me to live over there along o' her.'

'I see,' said Richard, looking rather astonished, however.

''Ees, I were agen it at first, but I come round to it arter. So I reckoned to let this here house to somebody—one of the men, p'r'aps; but now has you 've a-comed back, Richard, my boy, there bain't nobody I 'd like to see livin' here so much as yourself. My notion 'ud be for you to settle down wi' a wife to do for you and keep the place tidy, and work this here farm under me. My hands 'ull be pretty full, and I 'll be glad o' your help. *She's* got a biggish place to manage, and I 'll be glad to think as there 's somebody here as I can rely on. Well, what do you say?'

'What do I say?' cried Richard, stammering with joy. 'What can I say? I don't know how to thank you!'

'Well,' said the farmer jovially; 'and now, what about the missus? 'Ave 'ee got your eye on anyone as 'ud suit?'

'Why,' began Richard eagerly; he paused, and then continued laughingly, 'you must give me a little time, you know. I 've only been a few days in England.'

'That 's true. I 'm glad to think, my lad, as you don't want to take a wife from abroad. Nay, don't ye go travellin' for a wife. Take my word for 't, the best is often to be picked up close at hand. Not always, though,' he continued, reflectively. 'Poor Elias Fiander—ye mind 'Lias Fiander? He went travellin' all the way to Dorchester to buy a turmithoin' machine, and it was there, nigh upon eighteen miles off, as he come across his last missus. But you know her,' he went on with animation—'aye, now as I call it to mind, you were a-tellin' me how you drove her back to-day. Ah, sure, so ye did.'

'Yes,' said Richard quickly; 'yes, I told you all about that.'

'Ah, so ye did. 'T were funny how you come across her. I be pleased to think as ye 've met. She were a good missus to Elias—she were, indeed—and a good missus to one man is like to be a good one to another.'

Richard caught his breath and leaned forward; his face was flushed, his eyes shining.

'Why do you say this to me now?' he said eagerly.

His uncle removed his pipe from his mouth, took a sip of punch, and then looked at him solemnly.

'Because, Richard, my boy, 't is but nat'ral I should talk of her, seein' as we be goin' to be man an' wife so soon.'

'What do you mean?' cried Richard, almost violently. 'What are you talking about?'

'Why,' returned Isaac, raising his voice to a kind of mild roar, 'you have n't been listenin' to me. I've been a-talkin' about Mrs. Fiander —'Lias's widow. I be a-goin' to get married to she!'

'You!' exclaimed his nephew in the same loud fierce tone.

''Ees,' bellowed Farmer Sharpe. 'Have n't I been a-tellin' ye this hour and more? Did n't I say I were a-goin' to change my state, and did n't I tell 'ee she 'd a house of her own and wanted me to live over there along of her? But your brains was wool-gatherin'—I 'll lay a shillin' you was a-thinkin' o' your own young woman!' cried Isaac, with

a roar of laughter, stretching forward a long arm that he might give his nephew a facetious dig on the nearest available portion of his person.

Richard laughed too, spasmodically, and with a wry face.

'You 're a sly dog, Uncle Isaac,' he said. 'Ah, you 're a cunning old chap — *you 've* got your wits about you if mine have gone astray! Yes, and you 've very good taste too — you 've picked out the greatest beauty in Dorset.'

'Except your young woman, eh?' put in Isaac, with a chuckle and another dig.

'Except my young woman, of course,' agreed Richard, laughing again with that odd contortion of the face. 'But I have n't found her yet, you know.'

'My weddin'-day is fixed for the end o' Ju—ly,' said his uncle ruminatively. 'You 'll have to look out for your missus afore that time. I doubt as you and Bithey 'ud scarce get on so very well — I 'm used to her, you see, but she 's a cranky old body, and it 'ud never do for ye to settle down wi'out a woman o' some kind to do for 'ee. We might ha' the two weddin's same day: I 'd like to know as you was settled when I have to shift.'

'Thank you kindly, uncle; you 've always

been like a father to me, and I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for the welcome you've given me, and for wanting to do so much for me. But I don't know about settling down after all — I've been a rover so long, you see, I — I might n't be able to stick to it and then you might be disappointed.'

'Stuff an' nonsense! I'll not hear o' no objections. Why, Richard, you never were one to blow hot one minute and cold the next. It bain't half an hour since you said there was naught you wished for so much as to take up farm-work again and live on the old place — did n't 'ee?'

'Yes, but ——'

'But nothin'! You're a-wool-gatherin' — that's it. Your thoughts is a-wanderin' off to the new missus.'

'Is not that to be expected?' returned his nephew idly.

Resting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands he leaned forward, gazing thoughtfully into the fire:

'I have n't got over my surprise at your piece of news yet,' he said, after a pause. 'I thought you so determined a bachelor.'

'So I thought myself,' put in Isaac with a nod.

'And then — from what I 've seen of Mrs. Fiander I should never have imagined that she would be the wife you would choose when you did make up your mind to take one.'

'Why so?' inquired Isaac, somewhat roughly.

'She 's so young — forty years younger than you, I should think.'

'Thirty-nine,' corrected his uncle succinctly.

'Then she is so beautiful — so full of life, and spirit, and dash. I can't imagine how you came to think of her.'

There was a pause, during which Isaac meditatively smoked and rubbed his knees.

'Well,' he said at last, 'I did n't exactly think of it myself, ye see — but I could n't someways find it in my heart to say No.'

'To say what?' cried the young man, dropping his hands and whisking round in his chair.

Isaac gazed at him mildly, and continued to polish his corduroys.

'To say No,' he repeated, slightly uplifting his voice, and speaking very slowly and distinctly. 'I say I could n't find it i' my 'eart to — say — No — when she axed me!'

'She asked you! Do you mean to say that the proposal came from her?'

His uncle nodded.

'T war n't very likely it 'ud ha' come fro' me,' he remarked dispassionately. 'As I told her at the time, I never was a marryin' man.'

A silence ensued, during which Richard vainly endeavoured to readjust his ideas. At length he said faintly:

'And what did she say to that?'

'She said,' returned Farmer Sharpe stolidly, 'that it would n't be a bad thing for me — "'T is a fine farm," says she, "and a good business. You could easy work the two farms together," says she.'

Richard gazed at his uncle with starting eyes and a dropping jaw.

'But why, in the name of Fortune?' he ejaculated. 'I could understand her marrying again — but why you?'

'She knowed I 'd work the farm right, d' ye see? Things was goin' wrong all round, and she knowed I understood the work. Ah, I told her myself at the time that she ought to look out for a younger man; but she says, "I don't want no counter-jumpers," says she — meanin' the Branston folks. Ah, there were a good few after her, but she did n't fancy none o' them. She thought some was arter

the money, and none o' them knowed anythin' about dairy-farmin'.'

'In fact,' struck in Richard, rising from his chair and beginning to pace hastily about the room, 'she has proved herself to be a most practical woman. *You* won't make away with her money—*you* won't allow mismanagement of the business.'

'Jist so,' agreed his uncle, sucking vigorously at his partially extinguished pipe.

Richard continued to walk about the room, and presently paused opposite the hearth.

'Did she make an offer to Elias Fiander too?' he inquired sharply.

Isaac removed his pipe and stared up at him. The idea was evidently presented to him for the first time.

'He never telled me so,' he said. 'It were made up in a hurry, to be sure. 'Lias had n't no notion o' sich a thing when he started off from here. He went arter a turnip-hoer arter her granfer's death. They sold 'en up, poor old chap, and Rosalie—that's Mrs. Fiander—had n't nowhere to go.'

'Ha!' remarked Richard sardonically.

'But I think,' pursued the farmer, averting his eyes from his nephew's face and gazing stolidly at the fire—'I *think* 't was 'Lias as

axed her. 'Ees, now I can mind he told me so at the time. "Me wantin' a wife so bad," says he, "and her bein' such a good hand at the dairy-work, I thought I 'd make sure o' her," he says.'

'She told him, I suppose, that she was a good hand at dairy-work,' commented Marshall. 'Yes, I understand the matter now. She is, as I say, a practical woman.'

'She is — she is,' agreed Farmer Sharpe warmly. 'She be a wonderful good manager. Many 's the time I 've said that. Ah, I reckon I can say I 'm in luck.'

Richard murmured something inarticulate and returned to his chair, re-lighting his pipe and beginning to smoke without further remark. On the opposite side of the hearth Isaac ruminated contentedly, without appearing to notice his nephew's preoccupation, and tumblers and pipes were emptied in almost unbroken silence.

When Richard sought his room that night — the familiar little attic-room which had been his in childhood — his first act after a cursory glance of recognition and approval was to set down his candle on the little deal table and to draw carefully from his pocket a large envelope. Opening this, he took out a

print, evidently cut from some illustrated paper, or collection of 'Pictures of the Year.' Holding it close to the light, he looked at it intently. Underneath were the words, 'A Sleeping Beauty,' followed by the artist's name. The picture represented a cornfield with a large 'shock' of sheaves to the front, beneath which lay the outstretched figure of a girl asleep. Even in this rough reproduction a certain likeness to Rosalie was discernible, and Richard's fancy supplied the rest. Indeed, as he gazed, he contemplated not only the glowing and highly-finished work of art which had haunted him persistently since he had first beheld it, but the vision of that afternoon — the exquisite face, the lithe, graceful form which had suddenly appeared to him against its background of bloom and sunlit green. He seemed to hear again the blithe young voice which had thrilled him as it prattled at his side; he seemed to see the large eyes lifted a little shyly to his, and then modestly dropped because of his too evident admiration.

He had deemed these things the outward indication of absolute womanly perfection. His young imagination, fired by the unexpected meeting with Rosalie, and further

stimulated by his uncle's chance remarks, had created a marvellous romance before Isaac had pronounced the name of his own future bride. Now the golden glow had vanished, all was flat, and dull, and grey; and, what was worse, he knew his ideal to have been delusive. Young bloom and beauty and fascination meant nothing — Rosalie Fiander was a calculating, mercenary woman, devoid even of feminine reticence. Not content with 'setting her cap' — odious phrase! — at the man whom she considered best likely to protect her interests, she had actually offered herself to him, haggled over the prospective bargain, weighed with him the gains which must accrue to both. When she was little more than a child she had angled for old Elias Fiander. Well, she was homeless and penniless then, and might from her extreme youth be supposed to know no better, but now in the ripeness of her womanhood, with wealth, liberty, all that she could desire, at her command, she must needs sell herself again! Pah! such a nature must positively be depraved.

With an impetuous movement he held the paper over the candle, but as suddenly snatched it away again, extinguishing the

flame with his finger and thumb, and rubbing the burnt edge ruefully:

'This at least is a thing of beauty,' he said; 'why destroy it?'

Then, hastily restoring the print to its wrapper and thrusting it into his pocket again, he muttered: 'I wish I had never seen her.'

CHAPTER III

Butter? rolls o't!
Cream? why, bowls o't!

WILLIAM BARNES.

Come, come away,
Or let me go;
Must I here stay?
. . . . .
Troth, lady, no!

HERRICK.

ISAAC was somewhat disappointed at his nephew's lack of enthusiasm over a project which had at first seemed to take his fancy so much. Talk as he might about Richard's future, and his own desire that he should pass the remainder of his days on the Down Farm, he could extract nothing from the young man but vague expressions of gratitude, and a doubtful promise to think the matter over.

'I'm goin' up yonder to Fiander's,' remarked Isaac, after breakfast; 'there's a little matter there as I must see to. Ye mid as well step up along wi' me, Richard.'

'I was thinking of taking a stroll round this place,' rejoined Richard.

'Why, what 's all your hurry? Ye may as well wait till I am ready to go wi' ye. I 'll not be above two or three minutes at Littlecomb, and then we mid walk round together. Besides, ye 'll be wantin' to pay your respects to Mrs. Fiander, won't ye, arter drivin' her from Dorchester yesterday — and her that 's goin' to be your aunt?'

'To be sure: I must keep on good terms with my aunt, must n't I? Else perhaps she won't make me welcome when I come to see you.'

'No fear o' that — she 'll make 'ee welcome enough. She al'ays behaved uncommon civil and respectful to I in 'Lias's time. Ah, sure, that she did.'

'Perhaps she won't be pleased at my calling so early?'

'Early! Dear heart alive! You don't know that woman, Richard. She 's astir soon arter four in the morning, and she has her maids afoot afore that. Aye, and the men knows if they comes late they 'll get fined. Ah, she be a wonderful manager.'

'Then, what in the name of wonder,' said Richard to himself, as he followed the portly white figure across the yard and over the downs — 'what in the name of wonder can she want with you?'

Despite Farmer Sharpe's protest most people would have considered the hour at which they betook themselves to call at Littlecomb Farm a sufficiently early one. The dew lay thick and sparkling upon the short herbage of the downs, and the air was still sharp and keen. A lark was circling over their heads, its jubilant notes piercing Richard's heart with an odd sense of pain. What was this heaviness which had come upon him, and which even the brisk walk through the exhilarating air, and the delightfully familiar scents, and sounds, and sights could not drive away?

Now they had entered Rosalie's demesne. These wide fields were hers; yonder were her cattle grazing by the river; and here, peeping through the trees and compassed about by a goodly array of stacks, was her house with its bodyguard of farm-buildings.

Richard, who had not spoken much throughout the walk, became altogether silent as he crossed the well-kept yard, and even lagged behind when his uncle approached the open milkhouse door. Through this open door the sound of female voices could be heard, raised, one in voluble excuse, another, whose tone Richard recognised with a little shiver

of inexplicable anguish, in vituperation. But Isaac Sharpe boldly advanced into the building, and beckoned to him to follow.

'Why, what 's the matter here?' he inquired good-humouredly. 'Fine mornin', Mrs. F. I've brought my nevvy to see ye.'

'He'll find us rather in a mess, I 'm afraid,' returned Rosalie's clear voice, still with a distinct note of sharpness in it; 'but I am very glad he has come; I want to thank him for his kindness to me yesterday.'

Peering over his uncle Richard descried the mistress of the establishment stooping over the large cheese-vat already alluded to, one white arm, bare almost to the shoulder, vigorously kneading and stirring a huge mass of curds. Her buff print dress appeared to imprison the sunshine, and attitude and movement alike showed off her supple figure to the very best advantage.

Most lovers, thought the young man, would have been unable to resist the temptation of putting an arm about that inviting waist for the morning greeting — the arm of the future husband had surely a right to be there! But Isaac Sharpe stood bluff and square in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, his hat on his head.

'You 'll excuse my shaking hands,' said Rosalie, looking up with eyes in which the angry light still lingered, and a puckered brow. 'Everything is upset, and I can't leave the curds for a minute. Indeed, as it is I fancy the whole of this batch will be good for nothing.'

A hitherto imperceptible dimple peeped out near her lips when she spoke — such red ripe lips! Such a bewitching dimple! Isaac, however, merely thrust his hands a little deeper into his pockets, and again inquired with increased concern:

'Why, what 's wrong?'

'This morning I happened to be late,' said Rosalie, uplifting her voice, evidently for the benefit of the culprit, Jane, who had suddenly melted into tears; a fact which was betrayed by her heaving shoulders as she stood with her back to the visitors.

'I happened to be a little late,' repeated Rosalie severely, 'so I desired one of the maids' — here Jane sniffed deprecatingly — 'to start work without me. And when I came down, what do you think? I actually found the careless girl pouring the rennet in out of the bottle.'

'Tch, tch, tch!' commented the farmer, clicking his tongue commiseratingly.

'There were n't but a few spoonfuls left,' explained Jane, almost inarticulately.

'How could you possibly tell how many were left?' retorted her mistress, with increased acerbity. 'You know how particular I always am to measure it out drop for drop almost — a spoonful too much may make all the difference — particularly at this time of year. I call it downright wicked of you to run the risk of spoiling the whole vat-ful! There are a hundred and fifty gallons of milk in this vat — it should make nearly a hundredweight of cheese. And just because you are so idle and careless it may all go to waste!'

Jane turned her pretty tear-bedabbled face over her shoulder, and inconsequently and incoherently protested that she always did her best; then, with a gasp and a moan, she darted past the group in the doorway and ran round the house.

Richard looked after her with a disgusted air, and then his glance reverted to Mrs. Fiander, whose beautiful round arm was still embedded in curds, and whose face, a little paler than its wont, continued to be full of ire. What could this trifling mistake matter after all to such a rich woman, a woman who would soon be richer still? Besides be-

ing cold-blooded and self-interested, she was evidently miserly; she was, moreover, distinctly bad-tempered. His imagination, already warped by the revulsion of feeling consequent on his uncle's disclosures, was ready to take alarm at every trivial detail. Rosalie's pallor, and the slightly drawn look on her face — both due in reality to a sleepless night, resulting from an unaccountable perturbation of mind — were immediately attributed to an acute and unreasonable disappointment over an insignificant money loss. The eyes which had gazed on Rosalie so ardently yesterday were now busily tracing lines of fancied meanness in her face; those frowning brows surely revealed the shrew, the compressed lips spoke of parsimony. When that lovely colour faded, and those clear-cut features had become coarsened by age and self-imposed toil, what would remain? None of that beauty of soul which he had thought to find there.

'Well, well,' remarked Isaac placidly, 'these accidents will happen, but I would n't advise 'ee to be cast down by 'em. These here curds d' seem to be a-settin' all right. I know how 't is wi' young folks. A body has to stand over them all the time. Why, when we be

a-shearin' I d' scarce dare go in for a bit o dinner for fear o' findin' them poor ewes snipped to pieces when I come back.'

Rosalie jerked the mass of curds up with additional impetuosity, but made no reply.

'My nevvy,' pursued Isaac, 'thought he'd like to drop in an' pay his respects to 'ee, my dear, an' inquire how you was a-feelin' arter the accident yesterday.'

Here he nudged Richard as a tacit reproach for his muteness.

'I hope,' said the young man formally, 'that you are none the worse for the shock, Mrs. Fiander?'

The blue eyes shot up an inquiring glance, and the industrious arm paused for a moment. What was the meaning of this altered tone, and why was the gaze now bent on her fraught with such cold disapproval? They had parted like old friends, and she had looked forward more than she knew to their next meeting.

'Thank you,' she returned, in a tone almost as frigid as Richard's own; 'my nerves are not easily upset.'

She believed the statement to be true; yet the equilibrium of her system was at that moment, if she had but realised it, very seriously disturbed.

'Have 'ee sent for Nigger, Mrs. F.?' inquired Isaac.

'I sent James Bundy to look after him. He may not be fit to move for a day or two.'

'Ah, he were a good beast,' remarked the farmer; ''t is a pity ye did let 'en slip. 'T was wi' drivin' fast down-hill, my nevvy here d' tell me, an' that 's what he've never been used to. Ye should have druv 'en more carefully, my dear.'

Rosalie thought of the cause of her unusual haste on the previous day; it was her anxiety to escape from the too evident admiration of the grey eyes which were now bent on her with so different an expression. The memory confused her; the contrast stung her; she answered sharply, and with assumed indifference:

'One cannot crawl down every slope to suit the convenience of a worn-out animal!'

'He bain't worn-out, though,' returned her future husband, who invariably took things literally. 'Nay, I should say he'd last a good few years yet, though he be past 'ard work. 'Lias al'ays used 'en gentle; 't is wonderful how far that'll go both with man an' beast. "Fair an' soft do go far in a day," the

sayin' goes. Fair an' soft — ah, 't is trew, 't is trew!'

Rosalie bent her head over the vat in silence, her face averted, so that her visitors could see only the outline of her cheek, the exquisite curves of ear and neck.

'Fair and soft,' muttered Richard to himself. 'Fair and soft enough to look at, but her heart is as the nether millstone!'

His uncle gazed reproachfully at him; he was proud of his travelled and book-learned nephew, and had eagerly looked forward to the impression he was sure to produce on 'Mrs. F.,' who had also been highly educated, and was considered an authority on matters appertaining to culture — and he was not showing off at all! He was standing there, mumchance, as stupid as any other body might be. He gave him another admonitory nudge and remarked:

'Richard, that 's my nevvy, did quite take me by surprise last night. I was n't expectin' to see 'en at all. To tell the trewth I had no kind o' notion o' where he mid be. He had n't wrote — How long were it since you 've a-wrote me last, Richard?' inquired Isaac, driving home the query with his elbow, and again frowning and winking.

'I don't know,' answered his nephew, in muffled tones. 'A long time, I'm afraid; but, you see, you never wrote to me,' he added with a laugh.

'That be different, my boy,' returned the farmer seriously. 'There was reasons why I did n't write, Richard. I never was a writin' man. Lard, no,' — and here he relaxed, and uttered a jolly laugh, — ''t is as much as I can do to put my name to a receipt, an' then Bithey d' do it for I, and I do jist stick my mark under it. Nay, Richard, I never was one for writing much — nay, I was n't.'

He continued to roll his shoulders and to chuckle 'nay' meditatively at intervals, but his eyes were meanwhile fixed appealingly upon the face of Richard, who remained obstinately dumb.

Presently their hostess came to his assistance.

'I suppose, now that you are here, you 'll remain some time, Mr. Marshall?' she asked, without looking round; her voice in consequence sounding nearly as muffled as the young man's own as she bent over her cauldron.

'That depends, Mrs. Fiander. Of course I want to see as much as I can of my uncle,

but I 'm restless by nature, and — and I never stay very long in one place.'

'There now,' cried Isaac, in loud remonstrance. 'What, ye be at it again, be ye? Did n't we arguefy enough about it last night? I 'll not take No, an' so I tell 'ee! Ye 've a-comed home, and now ye may bide at home. Lard, I did n't think ye could be sich a voolish chap. What need have ye to go travellin' the world when ye have a good berth offered ye, an' them that 's al'ays been your friends ready an' anxious to keep ye? Here 's Mrs. F. will tell 'ee the same as I do, won't 'ee, my dear?'

'I don't quite understand what it is all about,' said Rosalie, pausing in her labours, however, and straightening herself.

'Why, 't is this way,' explained the farmer. 'When Richard come last night he says to me, says he, "I 've been a-longing for years an' years to get back to the wold place. An' now," says he, "I d' feel as if I could n't settle to naught but the old work. Farm-work," he says. "Well then, this here house 'ull be empty afore very long; an', moreover," says I, "I shall need to have somebody responsible to look after this place," for it stands to reason, Mrs. F., as I can't be in two places at one time.'

Rosalie endorsed this statement with an inarticulate murmur, and he continued:

'"Well, then," says I, "since you want to come back to the wold place an' take up the farm-work, why not live here and work for I?"'

'Why not, indeed?' said Rosalie.

'Jist what I d' say,' said the farmer indignantly; 'why not? First he were quite took wi' the notion, but arter a bit he did n't seem to relish it. Now I want to know,' pursued Isaac, extending an aggrieved forefinger, 'why don't 'ee relish it, Richard?'

'Suppose you should be disappointed in me — suppose I should n't give you satisfaction?' said Richard hesitatingly.

'Pooh! nonsense! I 'll let 'ee know fast enough if ye don't give satisfaction. Have n't I brought 'ee up? Bain't he much same as a son to I?'

'But if — if I should find I could n't settle, then you 'd be more vexed than if I had n't given in to the plan.'

'But why should n't 'ee settle, that 's what I want to know? Ax 'en that, Mrs. F., ax 'en why he should n't settle? Ha' n't 'ee travelled enough?'

'Yes, indeed,' said Rosalie, 'I should think

you ought to be glad of a little quiet, Mr. Marshall.'

'Well said!' cried Isaac. 'Tell 'en he 'll be a fool if he lets my offer slip.'

'Indeed,' repeated Rosalie, gazing in surprise from the heated and excited countenance of the elder man to the inscrutable one of his nephew — 'indeed I think Mr. Marshall would be very unwise if he did not accept it. It seems to me entirely to his advantage.'

'And of course,' said Richard, with a momentary gleam in his steel-grey eyes, 'of course my personal advantage should outweigh every other consideration! It is obvious. Nothing like a woman's clear head for solving a difficulty. I will take your advice.'

Rosalie's pretty face wore a look of such absolute bewilderment, and she was evidently so much at a loss to account for his sarcastic tone, that Richard suddenly burst out laughing; the cloud lifted from his brow, giving place to an expression of frank good-humour. 'Uncle Isaac,' he cried, clapping him heartily on the shoulder, 'forgive my chopping and changing so often; this time my mind is made up. I accept your offer. Shake hands on it!'

CHAPTER IV

The blackthorn-flower hath fallen away—
The blackthorn-flower that wise men say
Keeps wild and variable skies
  As long as it may stay;
But here 's the gorse, and here 's the whin,
And here the pearlèd may appears,
And poison-weeds of satin skin
Through every bank prick long green ears
  To hear the cuckoo-cries.

ELINOR SWEETMAN.

To gather flowers Sappho went,
  And homeward she did bring,
Within her lawny continent,
  The treasure of the spring.

HERRICK.

RICHARD MARSHALL drove the plough slowly up the brown slope, half turned at the summit, halted, and, having established his horses at a comfortable angle, sat down, with his back against a tall mossy bank sheltered by a little copse, to eat his breakfast.

He had already partaken of a 'dew bit' shortly after dawn; but two or three hours' exercise in the brisk morning air had whetted

his appetite afresh, and he now fell to work on his bread and bacon with the utmost zest and relish.

The great field, all glittering green save for the brown strip which testified to recent labours, stretched away for many goodly acres. On a lesser slope beneath he could see the roofs of Littlecomb Farm and its appurtenances, but the sight of the amber and ruddy outlines awakened in him now no feeling of repulsion. During the past weeks he had laughed himself out of his whilom fancy for the fascinating and disappointing widow; he had even taken himself to task somewhat severely for his strictures on that unconscious young woman. Was it her fault, after all, that her outer parts belied her real self? Why had he been so unreasonably angry because she had failed to correspond to the high estimate which he had formed on slight and inadequate premises? She was a very beautiful creature, and, no doubt, good enough in her way; if she was common-place, and had a sharp eye for the main chance, she would make the better wife to a practical farmer. He would in all probability get on well enough with her when she became his aunt, but meanwhile life was too full of con-

genial work and ever-growing interest to admit of his wasting time in improving his acquaintance with the future Mrs. Sharpe.

He had thrown himself into his new pursuits with characteristic energy, and found them daily more and more engrossing. He possessed a gift not often to be met with in the cultivator of the soil — a love of Nature for her own sake — a sympathy with her moods, not from the practical, but from the poetical standpoint. Clouds and sunlight, frosts and dew, meant more to him than to his brother-toiler; the very odour of the damp earth, the fragrance of the bursting buds in copse and hedgerow, of the crushed herbage beneath his feet, intoxicated him. The homely thud of the horses' hoofs as they trod the furrow, the ripping up of the green sod as he drove the plough through it, the mere consciousness of his own vigour and life and manhood dominating this solitude, filled him with a kind of ecstasy. 'This is what I want,' he had said to himself over and over again that morning; 'this is what I have always wanted!'

He had finished his breakfast now, but he permitted himself the luxury of repose for a few moments longer. He threw himself back on the bank, his head resting on his clasped

hands, and his eyes gazing up, up, through the interlacing boughs of the trees, outlined now with shifting silver in the morning light, through the ethereal leafage, still half unfolded, up to the heights of delicate blue beyond. He had fancied that there was not much breeze this morning; yet, as he lay thus quiet he could hear a faint rustling in the undergrowth, and the occasional crackling of twigs — a squirrel perhaps; but when was a wood known to be absolutely still? Besides the incidental noises attending the passage of living things — flying, running, creeping — the creaking and swaying of boughs, the fluttering of leaves, had not such places a mysterious movement and vitality of their own? Was there not always a stir, a whisper, in their midst produced by no ostensible cause?

Smiling upwards, his head still pillowed on his hands, Richard was meditating on some half-forgotten page of Thoreau which seemed to bear upon this fancy of his, when suddenly a woman's figure appeared on the crest of the bank close to him, and without warning sprang down beside him. Rosalie Fiander, with the skirt of her print gown gathered up so as to form a receptacle for the mass of

primroses which she had been gathering, and the fragrance of which was now wafted to Richard's nostrils — Rosalie Fiander, with minute dewdrops clinging to her dark hair, with morning roses on her cheeks, and the morning light shining in her eyes — a vision of grace and beauty, more captivating even than the glowing pictured Rosalie of the cornfield or the stately heroine of Yellowham Woods.

Richard sat up, the colour rushing over his sunburnt face; he had divested himself of hat and coat, his waistcoat hung loosely open, and his shirt was unfastened at the throat. For a moment Rosalie did not identify him; then, as he slowly rose to his feet, she too blushed.

'I beg your pardon; I did not know anyone was here. I had a half-hour to spare before breakfast and ran out to pick some primroses. This is my wood, you know,' she added hastily; 'I am not trespassing unless when I take a short cut home across your uncle's field.'

Ploughman Richard, with his bare brown arms and ruffled head, was not at all alarming. She scarcely recognised in him the trim, severe young man who had called on her ceremoniously a few weeks before, still less

the mysterious personage who had driven her home from Dorchester, who had said such strange things, and looked at her so oddly—Isaac Sharpe's nephew was just like anybody else after all. Being blithe of heart this bright spring morning, she smiled on him pleasantly, and, lowering the folds of her gown, displayed the primroses.

'Are they not lovely? I like them better than any other flower—in fact, I love them. Almost the first thing that I can remember is holding on to my mother's finger while she took me up to a bank of primroses; afterwards, when I grew old enough to pick them for myself, oh, the delight, each spring, of finding the first primrose!'

Now, curiously enough, the gay tone and easy manner had the effect of filling Richard with wrath; the very grace of her attitude, the child-like candour of her eyes were to him obnoxious, the more so because he could not repress a momentary thrill of admiration. He knew how much they were worth; he knew the sordid nature beneath this attractive disguise.

'Primroses are fine things,' he said, with assumed carelessness. 'You should have picked some before the nineteenth; then you would have had a good sale for them.'

'But I don't want to sell them,' cried she, her white teeth flashing out as she laughed, and the dimples coming and going. 'I picked them for myself — I shall fill every vase in the house. Primroses should never be sold; those you see in the streets look so miserable, all huddled together with their dear little faces crushed and faded, and even their scent gone! It seems a sin to sell primroses.'

'Yes, particularly as I don't suppose they fetch a big price in the market.'

She had gathered up a bunch in one hand, and now raised it to her soft cheek.

'They are like satin,' she said.

Somehow the gesture and the smile which accompanied it provoked Richard beyond endurance.

'They are pretty little yellow things,' he said, 'but not worth the attention of practical people. There are other yellow things more deserving of admiration — rolls of beautiful fresh butter, for instance; fine round cheeses! — The beauty of these is that they can be exchanged for still finer yellow things — golden coin, Mrs. Fiander, that is the only yellow thing really worth thinking about.'

'Are you so fond of money?' she asked innocently; and once more she laid the dew-

drenched flowers caressingly against her cheek. How could she look so guileless; how had she the face to turn the tables on him thus; above all, how dared she be so beautiful! He had almost succeeded in forgetting his transitory hallucination; he wanted to ignore her charm — and here she was tantalising him afresh.

'Are we not all fond of money?' he said, with a forced laugh. 'Are not you fond of money?'

'Am I?' queried she; and the blue eyes glanced up with genuine astonishment.

'Why, of course you are! We're all fond of it, I say. We men toil for it: we sell our brains for it — we sell our strength and power, and the best years of our lives for it. And you women ——'

He paused. Rosalie, surprised at his vehemence, but still half amused, inquired lightly:

'Well, what do we do? Take care of it when we've got it, and do without it when we have n't?'

'Not always,' he added; and this time there was no mistaking the deliberate insolence of his tone. 'Sometimes a woman sells herself when she has n't got it, and sometimes, mistrusting her own powers of management, she invites other people to take care of it for her.'

There was a dead silence for a moment. Richard, fixing his merciless gaze upon her face, saw the colour ebb from it, leaving the very lips white. His shot had struck home—he was glad of it.

'What do you mean?' said Rosalie at last, lifting her eyes, which she had involuntarily lowered, and looking at him steadily.

'I think you must know what I mean,' he returned, with a smile almost insulting in its contemptuousness.

'Why should you attack me?' she inquired, without flinching, though her large eyes looked pathetic in their surprise and pain.

'Am I attacking you? I am merely stating facts. When a penniless young girl marries a prosperous old man one is bound to conclude that his money is the chief attraction, and when that same girl, finding herself a few years later rich and free, offers herself for the second time to a man forty years older than herself——'

'Offers herself?' cried Rosalie, turning upon him fiercely while the blood returned impetuously to her face; 'how dare you say such an insulting thing to me?'

'Is it not true?' he inquired. 'I have the statement on most excellent authority.'

Rosalie dropped her flower-laden skirt, a yellow shower falling at her feet, and buried her face in her hands.

'Oh,' she groaned, 'Isaac told you that! He — he said — oh, how could he!'

The beautiful shoulders heaved, tears trickled through her fingers, but Richard steeled his heart against her. Let her suffer — let her cry! These selfish tears could not expiate the things that she had done. Tears and subterfuges were woman's natural weapons, but they should not avail her. She should be made to realise her own vileness.

'Do you deny it?' he said sternly.

Rosalie dropped her hands, and raised her head: her lip was still quivering, but her eyes shone through the tears.

'I deny nothing,' she said; and without another word walked away from him, down the slope, and across the field, passing through a gate at the further end.

Richard stood looking after her until she was out of sight; then his eyes reverted to the heap of primroses lying at his feet — a tumbled heap, sweet, and dewy, and fresh — just as they had fallen from her gown.

Mechanically he stooped and began to

gather them together, but presently he threw back again the flowers he had picked up.

'What should I do with them?' he murmured, half aloud. Straightening himself he passed his hand across his brow, and looked round him with a blank stare. 'What have I done?' he said.

CHAPTER V

Colin, the grass was grey and wet the sod
O'er which I heard her velvet footfall come;
But heaven, where yet no pallid crescent rode,
Flowered in fire behind the bloomless plum;
There stirred no wing nor wind, the wood was dumb,
Only blown roses shook their leaves abroad
On stems more tender than an infant's thumb—
Soft leaves, soft hued, and curled like Cupid's lip—
And each dim tree shed sweetness over me,
From honey-dews that breathless boughs let slip
In the orchard by the sea.

ELINOR SWEETMAN.

'YE bain't sich very good company to-night, Richard,' remarked Mr. Sharpe, laying down his knife and fork, and gazing critically at his nephew. 'Nay, I can't say as ye be. You have n't opened your mouth since we sat down, except just to put a bit into it now and again, and not too often neither. Ye bain't eatin' nothing to speak on, an' ye have n't a word to throw to a dog. What 's amiss?'

'Why—nothing,' returned Richard, rousing himself with a startled look from the brown study into which he had fallen. 'I suppose I am tired,' he added, as an afterthought.

'Ah, very like ye be,' agreed the farmer commiseratingly. 'It just depends on what a man 's used to how soon he gets knocked up. You be used to town, an' travellin', and that, and when you come back to the ploughin' it tries you a bit to start wi'. 'T is just the other way wi' I; I 'm used to the country, d' ye see, and when I do have to go to town — to Dorchester, or Weymouth, or any big place like that — Lard, I do get mortal tired! Walkin' them streets, now, and lookin' in at the shop-winders — dear heart alive, it makes me so weary as I could very nigh drop down in the middle of 'em! As for travellin' — goin' in trains an' sich-like — it do make me so stiff I can scarce lay legs to the ground when I do 'light from 'em. But I dare say you found it a hardish bit o' work turnin' up the big field yonder?'

His nephew made no response, and Isaac bawled out the question afresh.

The young man, who had been absently balancing a fork on his fore-finger, started, and replied hastily that he had n't found it at all hard — at least — yes, perhaps rather hard, but very pleasant; and he liked the work.

Isaac took a farewell pull at his pint mug, set it down, and pushed his plate away.

'Draw up to the fire, lad,' he said, 'and smoke your pipe quick, and then turn in — ye bain't fit for nothin' but bed.'

'No, no,' returned Richard hastily, as he rose, 'I could not go to bed yet — it is not much past eight. I don't think I 'll sit down by the fire — I 'll go out for a stroll to stretch my legs.'

'Stretch your legs!' commented his uncle indignantly. 'Ha' n't ye stretched them enough to-day already? You 've a-worked hard enough for two men.'

'No remedy so good as a hair of the dog that bit you, you know,' said Richard. 'A brisk turn will take the stiffness off, and it is a lovely evening.'

'Lard, how restless these young chaps do be!' ejaculated Isaac, as he scraped his chair across the tiled floor to the hearth; 'a body mid think he 'd be glad enough to set down for a bit. I 'll engage he 'll find it hard enough to turn out to-morrow morn.'

When Richard had proceeded a little way he paused, and drew a long breath; then, wheeling round swiftly, began to retrace his steps, brought himself to a stand-still for the second time, his hands clenched, his eyes fixed; finally, crying aloud: 'I will do it — I must do

it!' He turned once more, and pursued his former course.

The sun had set some time before, but the heavens were still luminous; the rosy glow which lingered at the horizon merging into soft primrose, which in its turn melted into an exquisite ethereal green. Against this lambent background the hills and woods stood out darkly purple, while the little copses scattered here and there upon the downs, and the hedge at the further end, appeared to be almost black. Little parties of his uncle's sheep scurried out of Richard's way, a bell tinkling here and there among them; birds flew almost into his face as he passed the groups of trees before alluded to; when he forced his way through the hedge a trailing tendril of honeysuckle, wet with the heavy dew, flapped against his face; every now and then a rabbit crossed his path, its passage scarcely noticeable in the dusk save for the flash of its little white tail. There must have been thyme growing on or about those downs, for its fragrance was strong in the air. Richard did not, however, pause to inhale it — it is even doubtful if he noticed it; yet, when by-and-by entering Rosalie's fields he skirted a bank overgrown with primroses, their perfume for a moment turned him almost faint.

Here was the house at last — how quiet at this hour! Nothing seemed to be stirring; no one was about.

Susan appeared in answer to a somewhat tremulous knock, and informed him that her mistress was in the garden.

'I 'll soon call her,' she added.

'No, no,' he returned quickly. 'I will go to her — I only want to see her for a moment.'

Who knew? She might refuse to obey the summons; it was best to come upon her without warning.

'Round to the left,' explained Susan; 'the path leads you up to the gate.'

Following her directions, and passing through the little wicket, Richard presently found himself in the walled enclosure which had once been the Manor House garden, for Littlecomb had been the dower house of a noble family; along the straight prim paths stately ladies had loved to pace, and the lavender hedge which was Rosalie's pride had been the pride of many a titled dame before her. It was more of a pleasant wilderness than a garden now, having been neglected by Elias and his predecessors on the farm; but Rosalie was endeavouring to reclaim it, and

already had made progress with the work. Richard, walking slowly onward, glanced anxiously down the dim alleys, and peered into various overgrown bowers. At length, amid a mass of distant greenery, he descried a moving figure, and, quickening his pace, advanced towards it. The afterglow had now almost faded, and the moon had not yet risen; here beneath these high walls and amid this dense growth everything looked shadowy and unreal.

He would scarcely have distinguished which was path and which was flower-border had he not been guided towards the spot where she stood by a double line of white pinks. Now a blossom-laden apple-bough barred his progress; now he passed beneath an arch of monthly roses, brushing off the moisture from leaf and bloom as he went.

All at once Rosalie's voice called through the dusk:

'Is that you, Susan? Come here for a moment; I want you to hold this branch.'

Richard made no reply, but hastened on. The shadowy figure turned, and he saw the pale silhouette of her face. She was standing beneath a great bush laden with white blossoms, which from their size and perfume he judged to be lilac; she had drawn down a

branch and was endeavouring to detach one of the clustering blooms.

'Who is it?' she said quickly.

'It is I,' he returned.

She loosed the branch, which flew rustling up to join its fellows, and made a step forward; he could see her face more clearly now; the gleam of her white teeth between her parted lips; he even fancied that he could detect an angry sparkle in her eyes.

'Why do you come here?' she said. 'Here at least I supposed myself safe.'

'I came,' replied Richard, in an unsteady voice, 'to beg your pardon most humbly, most sincerely, for my conduct to you to-day.'

'It was inexcusable,' she said, after a pause. It seemed to him that she was breathing quickly — perhaps with a just and natural anger.

'I do not attempt to excuse it,' he murmured.

'I cannot even understand it,' she pursued. 'What had I done to you? How do my private concerns affect you?'

There was a long silence, and then Richard said, almost in a whisper:

'I can make no excuse — I think I must have been mad! When I came to myself I felt — as if I could kill myself for my brutality

to you. All day the shame of it has been eating into my soul — I feel branded, disgraced! I cannot rest until you tell me you have forgiven me.'

There was silence again, broken only by the faint warbling of a thrush singing to his mate in the warm dusk.

'You ask a great deal,' said Rosalie at last. 'I scarcely know how I can forgive you.'

She saw the dark figure sway a little, but he spoke quietly:

'I can only say that I would give my life to recall those insulting words of mine.'

'Words!' she repeated. 'Words count for little! That you should think of me thus — that you should judge me so harshly!'

He said nothing; the thrush sang on, the liquid notes rising and falling with almost unendurable sweetness.

Then, 'I entreat you!' he pleaded once more. 'I entreat you to forgive me!'

She stretched out her hand in silence, and he took it without a word; it was cold, very cold, and it trembled.

She drew it away almost as soon as his fingers had closed upon it, and he turned and went away, his footsteps falling with un-

accustomed heaviness on the little path; and presently the gate swung to behind him.

Isaac was sitting by the dying fire, a foot resting on either hob, and surrounded by a haze of tobacco-smoke, when his nephew entered. He looked towards Richard with an aggrieved expression as he crossed the room.

'Well, them there legs o' yourn should be pretty well stretched by now. I was wonderin' whether you were comin' back at all to-night. Where have ye been all this while?'

Richard hesitated, and then, throwing back his head, answered deliberately:

'I 've been to see Mrs. Fiander.'

'What! to Littlecomb at this time o' night! What ever took 'ee there so late?'

'Why, to tell you the truth, I went to make an apology to Mrs. Fiander. She came across the top field to-day when I was ploughing, and I said something which hurt her feelings — in fact, I offended her very much, and I felt I could not rest to-night without begging her pardon.'

'Oh,' said the farmer, and then paused, eyes and mouth round with astonished concern. 'Well,' he continued presently, 'I 'm glad as ye 'polygised. I 'm very glad as ye

'polygised, Richard. 'Ees, that was very well done of 'ee. But what did you go for to offend her for?'

He leaned forward, anxious wrinkles still furrowing his brow, and puckering up his mouth as though he was going to whistle. By-and-by, indeed, he did actually whistle under his breath and without any regard for tune. Richard, meanwhile, stood looking down into the fire as though he had not heard the question.

'Eh?' hinted his uncle at last.

'Oh, I beg your pardon! I can't think, I 'm sure, how I came to forget myself so. I was out of temper, I suppose.'

'Ah,' commented the farmer. 'Well, I can say truly as she and me ha' never had a word, not since I knowed her. Nay, not so much as one word! We did al'ays get on wonderful well in 'Lias' time, and now I do really think as we gets on better than ever.'

'So you ought to,' said Richard, a trifle irritably; then he added in a softer tone: 'I don't believe anyone could quarrel with you, Uncle Isaac.'

'Well, d' ye see,' explained Isaac, waving his pipe impressively, 'even if I was a quarrelsome man — which I bain't — I never should

ax to quarrel wi' she. I 'm oncommon fond o' Mrs. F.!'

To this Richard made no rejoinder. Stretching out his foot he pushed the logs together, and then stood looking down at them again.

'I 'm sorry, Richard, as ye should ha' hurt her feelings,' went on the farmer, after ruminating for some time in evident distress of mind. 'Ah, I be very sorry for that, but ye could n't do no more nor 'polygise; nay, ye could n't do more nor that. I 'm glad ye did 'polygise, Richard.'

'So am I,' said Richard huskily; adding, with the same irritation which he had previously displayed: 'Not that it makes much difference one way or the other.'

''T is a bad thing,' went on the farmer, 'for to hurt a woman's feelin's in the beginning of acquaintance; it makes a bad start, d' ye see? It do rouse up notions as they 'd maybe never ha' thought on if they was n't crossed in the beginning. Now my poor mother — your grandmother, Richard — she did have sich tender feelin's there was no livin' in th' house wi' her. And my father — ah, I 've heard 'en tell the tale many a time — he did always set it down to his not havin' been care-

ful to keep the right side o' her when they was a-coortin'. 'T was this way, d'ye see? My father was a bit of a buck in his day, an' a'most up to the time when he had his banns put up wi' my mother he liked to have his fling, d'ye see? He 'd walk o' one Sunday wi' one maid, and the next maybe he 'd go along wi' another; and the third maybe he 'd go a-fishin', and there 'd be my poor mother wi' her best bonnet on all the time a-lookin' out for 'en so anxious. And she got that upset in her feelin's, and that nervous, ye know, that she was n't the better for it all her life after. Ah, I 've heard my father say often when she 'd scratched his face for him, or thrown his hat into the wash-tub, "'T is my own fault," he 'd say, "I did n't use to consider her feelin's as a young 'un, and her feelin's is a-comin' agen me now."'

Isaac shook his head slowly over this affecting reminiscence, and restored his pipe to its favourite corner. Richard said nothing for a moment, but presently turned towards his uncle with a smile.

'Don't you be afraid, Uncle Isaac. Mrs. Fiander's temper is perfect, I am sure. I was entirely in fault to-day, and I will promise most faithfully not to do anything

which might disturb your peace of mind in future.'

Though he spoke with assumed lightness, there was an earnest look in his eyes.

CHAPTER VI

Some friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:
Then heigh, ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly!

SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN Sunday came round Isaac Sharpe surprised his nephew by inviting him to accompany him on his usual visit to Littlecomb.

'I don't think you want me,' said Richard, colouring and hesitating; 'I should only be in the way. Two are company, and three are none, you know.'

'Nay now, 't is a silly notion that. "The more the merrier," I say. Besides, I have particular reasons for wanting you to come to-day. You and Mrs. F. have n't met since that night as ye 'polygised, have ye?'

'No,' said Richard.

'And I noticed you hung behind when I was talkin' to her arter church this mornin'. Was 'ee ashamed o' meetin' her?'

'That 's about it,' said Richard.

'Nay, but that will never do. If ye go on a-hangin' back, and a-keepin' out o' her way,

things will get awk'arder and awk'arder a-tween ye. Now, take my advice and come along wi' I quite quiet and nat'ral; it 'll all pass off so easy as ye could wish. Just drop in same as myself. I want 'ee to be friends.'

'Well, I can't refuse if you put it like that,' said Marshall. And the two sallied forth together.

In spite of Mr. Sharpe's prognostication, there was decidedly a little awkwardness about the young people's meeting. Rosalie greeted Richard somewhat stiffly, and invited him with formal politeness to take a seat.

''T is a fine day,' began Isaac, as he installed himself in the high-backed elbow-chair which had now become his by consecrated right. Rosalie responded hastily that it was a very fine day.

'Ah,' remarked the farmer, with a covert note of warning in his voice, 'my nevvy was a-sayin' as we come along that it was a wonderful fine day for the time o' year — did n't 'ee, Richard?'

As it happened to be the time of year when fine days were not uncommon, this alleged observation would not have testified to any extraordinary perspicacity on Richard's part; but as a matter of fact it was

entirely fictitious. Nevertheless the young man did not repudiate it.

'Yes,' he said, with his eyes on the floor; 'yes, to be sure.'

'Did n't 'ee find it oncommon warm in church, Mrs. F.?' pursued Mr. Sharpe, after a short silence.

'Yes, I did,' agreed she. 'I was longing for someone to open the door.'

'Mrs. F. d' say,' cried Isaac, turning to his nephew with an explanatory bawl, which was intended to stimulate him to further efforts at conversation — 'Mrs. F. d' say, Richard, as she found it oncommon warm in church.'

Richard's eyes travelled slowly from the carpet to his uncle's face, where they rested; for the life of him he could not muster courage to move them to the blooming face on the other side.

'Oh,' he commented faintly, 'did she?'

''Ees,' said Isaac emphatically; 'do 'ee ax her ——' Here he jerked his thumb significantly in Rosalie's direction. 'She d' say as she was a-wishin' as somebody 'ud open the door — did n't 'ee, my dear?'

'Yes, indeed,' said Rosalie.

'Ah, she 'll tell 'ee about that, Richard,' went on Isaac; and his enormous boot came

slowly sliding across the floor till it reached Richard's foot, which it proceeded to kick in an admonitory fashion. 'Jist ax her about that — If ye 'd ha' known she was wantin' the door open you 'd ha' opened it fast enough for Mrs. F., would n't 'ee, Richard?'

'Certainly,' responded Marshall, with his eyes still glued on his uncle's face.

'Ah, you can jist talk about that,' hinted the latter, as he proceeded to search in his pocket for his pipe.

A dead silence ensued. Isaac looked from one to the other, and the perspiration stood upon his brow. His strenuous efforts had exhausted him, but the desired consummation seemed just as far off as ever.

'Have you got your tobacco-box, Uncle Isaac?' inquired the dutiful nephew presently.

'Let me give you a light,' said Rosalie.

There they were again! What was the good of their talking to him? He wanted them to talk to each other.

'Richard,' said Isaac, after sucking for a moment at his pipe — when Rosalie applied the match a flash of inspiration had come to him — 'Richard, my boy, ye have n't been round this here farm since ye come home, have 'ee?'

'No,' said Richard; 'but I know it well of old.'

'Ah, but there's been improvement since ye left — there's been a many improvements. Ye'd better take him round, Mrs. F., and show him all what's been done the last few years. He be oncommon fond o' stretching his legs — Richard be — and it'll just suit him — won't it, Richard?'

Richard stammered confusedly that he should like it of all things.

'And you be a wonderful one for fresh air yourself, Mrs. F.,' went on the diplomatist. 'Jist take 'en out and show 'en everything, there's a good soul.'

Rosalie had risen willingly enough, for she had found the previous constraint exceedingly uncomfortable; but she now paused hesitatingly.

'Are n't you coming, Mr. Sharpe?'

'Nay, my dear, I 'll stay where I be. 'T is very comfortable here i' th' chimney corner, and I bain't so young as I was, d'ye see? Nay, you two young folks can go out and freshen yourselves up a bit, and make acquaintance; and the wold man will bide at home, and smoke his pipe, and be ready for tea when you come back.'

He nodded at them both with an air of finality, and twisted round his chair so as to present to their gaze a large and inflexible back.

'Well, then, we had better start if we are to be back by tea-time,' said Rosalie, a little sharply; and Richard took up his hat, and followed her out in silence.

The whole place was wrapped in Sabbath stillness; milking was over, and a distant line of red and dappled cows was vanishing down the lane, followed by one or two of the dairy 'chaps,' with white pinners protecting their Sunday clothes. Save for the calves, which thrust their blunt, moist noses through the bars of their enclosure, and the fowl cackling lazily as they lay sunning themselves in the angle of the barn, the barton was absolutely deserted.

'We drained the big mead four years ago,' said Rosalie, 'and threw the twenty-acre into it; 't is beautiful pasture now. Would you like to see it?'

Richard hurriedly expressed a desire to that effect, and the two betook themselves in silence along a narrow farm-track to the rear of the house, which led to the field in question. They walked with the breadth of

the lane between them, and in unbroken silence; their eyes, by common accord, gazing straight in front, and both secretly rebelling against the expedient which Isaac had deemed so happily devised. At length they came to a gate set in the hedge, and turned to look over it. A great green expanse stretched away before their gaze, meeting the sky-line on one side where it sloped upwards, and melting on the other into the lighter, more delicate green of springing corn; beyond were the woods, which, as well as the low line of hills behind them, were covered by a gentle haze.

Richard leaned his elbows on the topmost rail of the gate, and his face gradually cleared as his eyes roamed over the landscape.

This county of Dorset has given birth to more than one great writer of lowly origin, whose early nurture amid field, and heath, and woodland has fostered an intimate and loving sympathy with Nature, to which each in turn has given exquisite expression. Richard Marshall, born of the same sturdy peasant stock, brought up amid the same pastoral surroundings, possessed a somewhat kindred spirit, though he was denied this gift of expression. Yet the inglorious rustic

Milton was not always mute; he had read so much, and meditated so much, and, above all, felt so deeply, that at times something of what he thought and felt struggled to his lips and found vent in words, inadequate, indeed, but suggestive.

'How beautiful it all is!' he said, turning to Rosalie, with a very poet's rapture in his eyes. 'It seems to fill one like music.'

'Yet I suppose you have seen far finer sights during your travels,' returned she, speaking naturally for the first time, as she too leaned over the gate.

'Finer things? Oh, yes, perhaps; but this homely beauty touches me as no other sight could do. Something about a great sketch of green like this always affects me curiously. I love these wide fields.'

'Yes, I remember your saying so,' said Rosalie. The ice was broken now and she could talk to him freely, even taking courage to broach a subject which had much occupied her thoughts lately. 'You told me, you know, how pleased you were at the sight of the cornfield in — in my picture.'

He did not turn towards her, and continued to scan the mead; but over his brown face she saw the colour rush quickly.

'Oh, yes,' he said; 'of course I remember telling you about it.'

'I wanted to ask you was — was the picture a very large one; and was it well painted?'

'Yes, very large indeed, and beautifully painted. There was an iron railing in front of it because people pressed round it so. I was told it was the picture of the year.'

'Was it?' cried Rosalie; and at the note of delight in her voice he turned and looked at her with a smile. Her cheeks were pink with excitement, her eyes shining. 'Oh!' she cried, with a sigh of longing, 'I would give anything to see it.'

'I have a little print of it here,' returned he impulsively; 'I cut it out of a paper. It will give you some idea of it, though of course a very poor one.'

In another moment he partly withdrew from its enclosure the print in question, holding the envelope firmly in his own hand, however, so that the charred margin was hidden.

'See,' he said, pointing with his disengaged hand, 'there is your house — over there in the corner, and here are your men, and here, under the piled-up sheaves, are you. But of course the figure in the picture is far more like you.'

'I see,' said Rosalie. 'Yes, it must be a nice picture; and you say it is beautifully done?'

'It is beautifully done. It is so real, so vivid, that I felt as if I could walk into the picture. These sheaves stand out so that one might think it easy to pass behind them.'

He glanced up as he said these words, and was surprised to see Rosalie colour almost to the temples. His own heart gave a sudden throb. Was it possible that she had divined the audacious thought which had so often come to him as he recalled that picture, and which, since his uncle's revelations, he had resolutely striven to banish?

As a matter of fact there did happen to be a certain similarity between this thought of his and that which had caused Rosalie to change colour. For there had flashed across her mind the remembrance of the unknown artist's words: 'Perhaps if I come across a very attractive specimen of a rustic I may place him just behind the stook.'

'This is the name underneath, I suppose?' she said hastily. 'What is the picture called? I cannot see from here.'

'It is called "A Sleeping Beauty,"' returned Richard.

She was dumb for a moment, hot waves of

colour rushing over brow and neck. What was it the man had said last year? 'You will wake up some day, my beauty.' Words of ill omen! They had often tantalised and tormented her, but now, as they recurred to her, her heart seemed to stand still. Ashamed of her burning face, on which the young man's eyes were now fixed, and of the agitation which she could not master, she suddenly bent forward confusedly.

'What is the name of the painter? Let me look.'

Before Richard could divine her intention she had snatched the print from his hand, its black and jagged edges immediately catching her eye.

'Why,' she said in an altered tone — 'why, it is burnt.'

It was now Richard's turn to look confused.

'I began to burn it, but repented of my intention.'

'You wanted to burn it,' said Rosalie, 'because you were so angry with me. Why were you so angry with me? Was it because of — of what your uncle told you?'

'Yes.'

'I know he did not mean to do me harm,' said Rosalie tremulously, 'but I don't think

he — he can have made you understand properly. Everything was going wrong, and — and I was so much bothered; I found I could not manage by myself, and he had been my poor Elias's friend' — she was beginning to sob now — 'and I knew I could trust him not to do anything Elias would n't have liked, and — oh, it is so difficult to explain!'

'Pray do not try to explain,' said Richard very gently.

'But you should n't misjudge me as you do,' cried she, and then burst into tears.

'I do not misjudge you now,' said Richard in a low voice. 'Oh, don't cry! I assure you I understand. You have been quite right — quite right all along.'

The big tearful blue eyes looked at him over the crumpled handkerchief.

'But you said — you said I sold myself,' she gasped. 'You should n't have said that! I loved my husband.'

'I am sure you did,' said Richard gravely and tenderly.

'Yes, indeed I did. I loved him from the first. He was like a father to me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Richard, and he looked at her with an odd mixture of wonder and compassion.

'He was just as kind and dotingly fond of me as my own dear granfer.'

'To be sure,' said Richard. 'Yes; no wonder you loved him.'

Something in his tone caused Rosalie to pull down her handkerchief and to cast a keen glance at him.

'Why do you look at me like that?' she said passionately.

'Was I looking at you in any particular way?' returned he, averting his eyes quickly.

'Yes, you were. You were looking at me as if you were sorry for me! How dare you be sorry for me?'

'Were you not telling me,' he said quietly, 'how much you felt the loss of your good old husband?'

'You know it was not that,' she retorted. 'You looked at me as if I were a child who had no sense — as if I did not know what I was saying.'

'Did I?' said Richard. 'I beg your pardon.'

'Is that what you really think of me?' pursued she, her eyes full of wrathful fire, though the tears were still standing on her cheeks. 'Answer me — I insist on your answering me!'

Richard's gaze had been fixed on the little

print which she was holding, and Rosalie, marking this, had felt an increase of indignation. Did he dare to share the opinion which the artist had so impertinently pronounced? Rousing himself, however, he turned towards her, and their eyes met.

'I do think,' he said, 'that you know very little of life. Perhaps it is all the better for you. The fruit of the tree of knowledge is nearly always bitter—and sometimes it is poisonous.'

Rosalie was about to make a very angry rejoinder when the sound of steps close to them made them both suddenly start; on looking round they beheld a loving couple, such as are so frequently to be met with in rural districts on Sunday afternoons, sauntering down the lane.

Rosalie hastily restored her handkerchief to her pocket, and again leaned over the gate, endeavouring to assume a careless attitude; but she was secretly much annoyed, for the young man who was so gallantly escorting a much befringed and beribboned lady was no other than Sam Belbin. At any other time she would have been somewhat amused on discovering how soon her lowly admirer had consoled himself. He was working at Bran-

ston now, and his companion was evidently a townswoman; but that he should come on her just then, in the midst of her tears and wrath, with Richard Marshall in such close proximity, was most vexatious.

Sam stared hard as he approached, taking in, as Rosalie felt though she did not again look towards him, every compromising detail of the situation. When they had passed on he made some facetious remark to the girl on whose arm he was hanging, to which she responded by loud laughter.

The little incident impressed Rosalie disagreeably: she turned to Richard petulantly, holding out the little print which had been the cause of so much agitation.

'You had better finish burning this,' she said.

'Perhaps I had,' returned he, with unexpected docility.

Isaac looked so placid and cheery when they entered, and greeted them with so bright a smile, that Rosalie was conscious of a sudden rush of remorse.

Going up to him she placed her hand upon his shoulder, a caress which astonished its recipient mightily, for he was not accustomed to endearments from her. Rosalie kept her

hand there, however, glancing defiantly at Richard the while, as though to say, 'You are wrong in thinking me so ignorant; see how I love and appreciate this good man;' and Richard smiled back kindly, as if replying, 'I see it, indeed, and I am glad that you are content.'

'Well,' said Isaac, squinting down sideways at Rosalie's hand. 'Well, Mrs. F., did you take 'en all over the place?'

'I took Mr. Marshall to see the big mead,' returned she, a little doubtfully.

'Ah, I 'm sure he thought that improved. Well, and then you took 'en up to see the root crop?'

'No — no, we did n't go there; we did n't like to go too far, as you were here by yourself.'

'Why, I were all right.' Here Isaac slowly lifted the shoulder on which Rosalie's hand still lingered, and again glanced down at it. As, taking the hint, she withdrew it, he gently rubbed the place where it had rested.

'You took 'en down to the carnfield, though,' he continued. 'I 'll engage he thought them oats was a-comin' on wonderful.'

But they had not been to the cornfield, it appeared, nor yet to see the potatoes, nor

round by the vegetable garden, nor through the orchard; they had just been to the big mead and back.

'Well,' commented Mr. Sharpe, gazing at them in amazement, 'ye must ha' walked oncommon slow!'

'We stood for some time looking at the view,' said Richard, seeing Rosalie somewhat confounded.

'Lookin' at the view, eh?' echoed his uncle. 'There bain't any view to speak on from the mead. If you 'd ha' gone a bit further up the lane and turned the corner ye 'd ha' had a beautiful view o' Branston. But if you enj'yed yourselves it 's all right.'

He wheeled round in his chair as he made this last remark, and looked from one to the other of the young folks. Both faces were alike downcast, and somewhat paler than usual. After a moment's scrutiny Isaac became as crestfallen as they.

'So long as you enj'yed yourselves,' he repeated slowly. 'So long as ye 've a-made friends — I want 'ee to be friends, d' ye see?'

Rosalie and Richard glanced at each other. He read in her face a kind of antagonism mingled with fear, and dropped his eyes quickly lest they might betray the anguish

and longing with which his heart was full to bursting.

'I want 'ee to be friends, d' ye see?' repeated the farmer anxiously and pleadingly. 'There 's me and you, Mrs. F., as friendly as can be; and there 's you and me, Richard — you're much the same 's a son to me, bain't ye? — well, then there 's you and Mrs. F., why should n't 'ee be friendly wi' her?'

Richard, to whom the question was directed, remained dumb. *Friends!* Could they ever be friends?

Rosalie, however, made a step forward and extended her hand.

'Why should we not, indeed?' she said. 'To tell you the truth, Isaac, we have done nothing but quarrel since we first met each other, which was very silly and unreasonable of us. Now, for your sake I am determined not to quarrel any more; and for your sake, I think, he too should be willing to keep the peace.'

'Well said!' cried Isaac heartily. 'Well said, Mrs. F.! Now, Richard, my boy, where 's your hand? Just catch hold o' Mrs. F.'s. That 's it — that 's it! Shake it well!' Here he thumped the arm of his chair jubilantly. 'You 'll be the best o' friends from this day

for'ard! Here we be, we three, friends all! Jist as me and poor 'Lias and Mrs. F. was friends — dear heart alive! yes, we was friends too — the best o' friends! We was three then, and we be three now, bain't us, Mrs. F.? We three! I do mind a old song as your poor dear mother used to sing, Richard:

> 'When shall we three meet agen?
> In starm, in zunshine, ar in rain!

Lard, yes, she used to sing it, poor soul! Well, now we be three agen, bain't us? Three good friends! So, if you 'll mix the usu'l glass, Mrs. F., we 'll drink to the bond o' good fellowship.'

'Yes, of course,' said Rosalie indistinctly. 'I forgot all about your glass, Isaac; I 'm so sorry; I 'll see to it at once.'

She ran out of the room, glad to make her escape, and Richard sat down near the hearth.

Friends! They were to be friends as his uncle, and Elias, and Rosalie had once been friends! He had felt her hand twitch in his as Isaac had spoken; to her the proposition was doubtless as distasteful as to him it was impossible. What was his uncle thinking of? There were some things which flesh and blood — young flesh and blood — could not

brook, and this triangular bond was one of them. But he would be patient for a little while; he would choke down his rebellious sense of injury. His secret, thank Heaven! was secure; neither the guileless Isaac nor Rosalie herself had the faintest idea of the miserable passion which he was striving so hard to conquer. What was it she had said? They were to be friends—friends for his uncle's sake. His uncle, to whom he owed everything—his kind, faithful, generous old benefactor. Well, he would try.

That night, in the seclusion of his attic room, he once more drew forth Rosalie's picture.

'Sleep on, Beauty,' he said. 'Sleep on in peace! I shall not try to wake you. Sleep soundly; do not even dream.'

And, after a last silent look, he held it steadily in the flame of the candle, watching its destruction unflinchingly until the last feathery film dropped from his fingers.

CHAPTER VII

> And times he saith: 'Why must man aye forego?
> And why is life a nobler thing through pain?'
> And times: 'Since Love's sweet apple hangs so low,
> Shall I not strongly grasp and count it gain?'
>
> ELINOR SWEETMAN.

FOR some time after Isaac's apparently successful peace-making the friendly relations between the parties concerned remained unbroken. Richard was frequently sent on messages to Littlecomb, acquitting himself on these occasions in a strictly business-like manner; and when he accompanied his uncle thither he made such strenuous efforts to appear at his ease and to entertain its hostess that Isaac was delighted beyond measure.

'How th' chap d' talk!' he would say sometimes under his breath, with an admiring nod and wink. 'Bless me, he d' talk like prent! I d' 'low there is n't very much as my nevvy don't know.'

Richard, indeed, in his desire to avoid those terrible long silences which had so much discomposed him during his first visits to Littlecomb,

embarked upon wild flights of fancy, related at length his past experiences, and delivered his opinion upon men and things with a fluency which frequently surprised himself. The fact was that he was afraid to pause; were he to come to a halt when those blue eyes were fixed upon him, could he ever take up the thread of his discourse again? Even as it was, the mere consciousness of that intent gaze made him sometimes falter; but, recovering himself, he would go on with a rush, knowing that he was making many wild statements, but persevering nevertheless. He was bound to do all the talking, if talking there must be, for Rosalie was very silent, and his uncle was at no time garrulous.

But the harmony of these relations was rudely broken by an unexpected incident.

One warm afternoon, early in June, Farmer Sharpe chanced to be standing by his own gate, gazing abstractedly up and down the lane. Presently he descried an undersized, narrow-chested figure making its way towards him, and, as it drew near, recognised Mr. Samuel Cross.

'Fine evenin',' remarked Isaac, nodding sideways in his direction, and expecting him to pass on.

'A very fine evening, Mr. Sharpe,' returned Samuel, pausing, and leaning against the gate-post, with the evident intention of entering into conversation. 'The very evenin' for a quiet walk.'

'Walkin' bain't much in my line,' returned Isaac. 'Nay, not without I 'm obliged to — seein' after the men and goin' round the fields, and across the downs to look after the sheep; but walkin' — meanin' goin' for a walk jist for pleasure — it bain't in my line at all.'

'It 's in other people's line, though,' said Samuel; and he shot a cunning glance at the older man out of his little red-rimmed eyes. 'I met your nephew strolling up towards Littlecomb just now.'

'Very like ye did,' agreed Sharpe. 'He do often go up there on business.'

'Lucky chap!' exclaimed Cross. 'The rest of us don't often contrive to make business agree so well with pleasure.'

He paused to snigger, and Isaac turned his mild grey eyes inquiringly upon him.

'Nay, Samuel Cross,' he remarked, 'I don't suppose as *you* do.'

The slight stress laid upon the personal pronoun appeared to irritate the young gentleman, and he replied with a certain acerbity:

'There is n't, as a rule, much pleasure to be found in doing honest business, Mr. Sharpe.'

'Not among lawyers,' said Isaac, nodding placidly. 'So I 've been told.'

'There 's others besides lawyers, though,' cried Samuel, 'as are n't so very honest! He! he! You 're a very confiding man, Mr. Sharpe — a very confiding uncle. 'T is n't everyone in your situation that would care to make such a handsome young man his business-manager where a handsome young woman was concerned. He! he! Your nephew, no doubt, will do the business thoroughly — perhaps a little too thoroughly.'

'My nevvy,' returned Isaac loftily, 'may be trusted to do his dooty, Sam'el. 'T is more nor can be said for many folks as be all for pokin' their noses where they bain't wanted!'

Mr. Cross's always sallow complexion assumed an even more jaundiced hue as he retorted:

'Most people do no business on Sunday — in England they don't at least; but I suppose Mr. Richard Marshall has brought foreign notions back with him. He was seen two or three weeks ago doing *business* with Mrs. Fiander quite as per usual. They were standin' close together lookin' over a gate, just as if he and

she were keepin' company. And he was tellin' her such touchin' business details that she was actually crying, Mr. Sharpe.'

'Cryin'!' ejaculated Isaac, in a kind of roar. 'Stuff and nonsense! What had she to cry for?'

'How should I know? Because prices had gone down, I suppose, since, according to you, they talk nothing but business when they are together.'

'Oh, drop that,' cried the farmer, losing patience at last. 'What be you a-drivin' at, Sam'el Cross, wi' your hints?'

'Why,' rejoined Samuel, thrusting his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets — 'why, the remark as was passed by the young man that saw them in the lane will perhaps throw some light on the subject. Says he, "I believe," he says, "as the widow Fiander be a-takin' on wi' the new love before she is off wi' the old." So if I do drop a hint, Mr. Sharpe' — and Samuel assumed a virtuous air, and struck an appropriate attitude — 'I do it in the way of kindness. Take my advice and *look* sharp — look like your name, sir! We lawyers see a deal of the world, a deal of the wickedness of the world, and we know that worthy folks are often caught nap-

ping. But don't you be caught, farmer — keep a good look-out, or your bride will be snapped up from under your very nose.'

'Now I 'll tell you what it is, Sam'el Cross,' cried Isaac, who had been shifting from one foot to the other during the latter part of the clerk's speech, and was purple in the face with suppressed ire, 'since you 're so fond of advice maybe you 'll take a bit from me. Jist you keep that long tongue o' yourn quiet. What do ye mean, ye little treecherous spy, by poking your nose into other people's business and tryin' to make mischief between them that 's as good as father and son? I know my nevvy a deal better than you know him. My nevvy bain't a snapper, an' so I tell 'ee! Now you jist take yourself off out of this, and don't 'ee come here wi' no more lyin' tales, else maybe ye 'll find this here stick o' mine laid about your shoulders. I bain't so strong as I were, but I could make a shift to hit 'ee a crack or two — so now ye know.'

Samuel had started back as words and gestures grew threatening, and now deemed it better to beat a retreat; turning, however, at a safe distance to bestow a withering valedictory smile upon his adversary, and to remark that he was sorry for him.

Ever since his rejection by Rosalie he had been burning with resentment against her, and desirous of an opportunity of venting it. A chance meeting with Sam Belbin had resulted in the latter's imparting to him a highly-coloured version of the scene which he had witnessed between Rosalie and Richard in the lane. The desired opportunity seemed to have arrived, and Samuel had hastened to take advantage of it, with, as has been seen, indifferent success. As he now hastened away as rapidly as his short legs would carry him he encountered the very person he had been so anxious to traduce. Richard nodded, and would have passed on, but that Cross, who was still suffering from a redundancy of spite, thought the opportunity favourable for venting it.

'You are back already,' he remarked. 'I wonder you did n't contrive to be a bit longer over your *business!* You would n't ha' been missed yonder. Your uncle seems quite content with your doings. As I told him just now — he has a confiding nature.'

'What do you mean?' said Richard, speaking in a low even voice, but with an ominous flash of the eyes.

'Ha! you know what I mean well enough,

you sly young dog! If you don't, ask the fascinating young widow — ask lovely, dainty Mrs. F. She knows what she's about, though she contrives to look so demure. Come,' marking the expression of Richard's face, 'you need n't turn rusty over it — I 'll tell no tales, bless you! But there 's others besides me that has been passing remarks about the Widow Fiander's new business-manager. Ha! ha! — You may carry on, though, as far as I am concerned — perhaps I know a little too much about the lady to envy you; she has played a double game before now. As for the old man, *he 'll* find out nothing; he 's as blind as a bat — as blind as a bat!'

Here Mr. Cross thrust his tongue into his cheek, and made a hideous contortion of countenance calculated to convey an impression of his own extreme artfulness and of his contempt for the old farmer's short-sightedness.

His own vision, perhaps, might with advantage have been a little clearer; a man of quicker perceptions would have realised that Richard's persistent silence was more fraught with danger to him than a torrent of wrathful words. He was, therefore, considerably surprised when Marshall suddenly brought down his vigorous right hand upon the cheek at

that moment distended by Samuel's malevolent tongue, and, before he had time to spring backwards, the other palm inflicted similar chastisement on its fellow.

The lawyer's clerk gasped, spluttered, and finally uttered a choking howl.

'Hang you! You 've made me nearly bite my tongue off!'

'Serve you right if I had,' cried Richard. 'You little reptile, if you so much as say another word of this kind I 'll half kill you!'

He had seized Samuel by the shoulders and was now shaking him slowly backwards and forwards:

'Do you take back every word of your vile slanders?'

'Ye — ye — yes,' gasped Cross, in an agony of terror.

'Will you give me your word to keep that foul tongue of yours quiet in future?'

'Oh Lord, yes, Richard Marshall. For Heaven's sake let me go! You 've about half killed me as it is!'

Richard released him with a parting admonition to look out, and Cross went on his way with a staggering gait, and stuffing his pocket-handkerchief into his mouth.

Richard, still in a white heat of passion,

was striding along at a tremendous rate, when he suddenly observed the large white-clad person of his uncle standing contemplatively some twenty yards away from the scene of the encounter. His good humoured face wore a pleasant and satisfied smile.

'Well done, lad!' he remarked, as soon as Richard came within hearing. 'Ye did give it 'en in style! I never did see nothing more neat. I do rather think, Richard, as Mr. Sam'el Cross 'ull have the toothache. I d' 'low he will.'

'I only wish I had made every bone in his body ache!' cried Richard, still fuming.

'I d' 'low as he said something as ann'yed 'ee, Richard,' said the farmer, ceasing his placid chuckles and looking intently at his nephew.

'Yes,' returned Richard, 'he annoyed me very much. He — in point of fact, he insulted me.'

'Well, now,' commented Isaac, 'that was strange. I did n't think he 'd insult 'ee to your face, Richard. He was a-talkin' to me jist now, and he did say some very insultin' things agen you — but that was behind your back, d' ye see? I did n't think the chap would acshally go for to say 'em to your face.'

'What did he say of me?' said Richard breathlessly.

'Why, he did say redic'lous things about you and Mrs. F. Ah, the little raskil could n't so much as leave Mrs. F.'s name out! And he were very oncivil to me — ye 'd scarce believe how oncivil he were. Up and told me straight out as if I did n't look out you 'd be snappin' up Mrs. F. without "By your leave," or "With your leave." But I give it 'en back well, I can tell 'ee. Says I, "My nevvy bain't a snapper," says I. Them was my very words. "Ye little treecherous spy," I says, "don't 'ee be a-pokin' your nose into other folks' business. I know my nevvy," I says, "and my nevvy bain't a snapper."'

Here Isaac paused to chuckle jubilantly, and, turning, slapped his nephew jovially on the back.

'What do you think of that for an answer, eh?'

'Why, that it was an excellent one,' said Richard, beginning to stride on again so rapidly that his uncle could scarcely keep pace with him.

'And I told him too,' pursued the latter, 'that if he came agen with sich lyin' tales I 'd lay my stick about his shoulders.'

'I 'm glad you said that,' exclaimed the young man without turning his head. 'I 'm glad you told him they were lying tales. They *are* lying tales!'

'And the stick,' Isaac reminded him with modest triumph. 'I reckon I brought it in rather neat about the stick. Says I, "I bain't quite so young as I were, but I could make shift to hit 'ee a crack or two yet."'

'I wish I had thrashed him within an inch of his life!' came the savage comment thrown over Richard's shoulder.

'Lard, Richard, how you do lay them long legs o' yourn to the ground,' panted Isaac, pausing to wipe his brow. 'I 'm fair out o' breath. Bide a bit — bide a bit; let me blow. There, don't 'ee be in sich a takin', lad. I reckon them there little taps as ye gave Sam'el Cross 'ull keep 'en quiet for some time. He be gone t' other way, anyhow; and it won't do 'ee no good to run me off my legs.'

Richard came slowly back; his face was fixed and stern, but he spoke more quietly.

'Uncle, I blame myself to a certain extent for what has happened. I might have guessed that in a gossiping little place like this people would talk if I went so often to Littlecomb. I must keep away altogether for the present.'

'Nay now, don't 'ee let yourself get so upset. What signifies a bit of idle chatter! You don't need to take no notice of it at all.'

'But I will take notice of it,' cried Richard. 'I don't choose that people should take liberties with my name; and what is worse — with hers. I need not assure you, Uncle Isaac, that I have never said one word to Mrs. Fiander that anyone need find fault with.'

'To be sure,' agreed Isaac, 'of course not.' He came to a sudden pause, however, and cast a sidelong look at his nephew, scratching his jaw meditatively. 'There was one day — one Sunday — Sam'el Cross was a-sayin', somebody seed you both standin' a-lookin' over a gate, and Mrs. F. was a-cryin'. That was n't very likely, I don't think. 'T was n't very likely as you 'd say aught as 'ud make Mrs. F. cry.'

Richard drew a quick breath, and his hands involuntarily clenched themselves.

'She did cry one day,' he said. 'It was the first Sunday you took me to Littlecomb. She imagined' — hesitatingly — 'that I had a bad opinion of her, and she cried, and said I was unjust.'

'That 'll be the day you went to see the big

mead,' said Farmer Sharpe reflectively. 'Ye had n't made friends then. Ye have n't made her cry since, Richard, have 'ee?'

'Of course not.'

'Women be so fanciful. Ye did n't really have a bad opinion of her, Richard?'

'Far from it.'

'She be a very dear woman — a very dear woman. 'T is n't very likely as anybody 'ud have a bad opinion of Mrs. F. Well, ye be real trew friends now, and ye don't need to take no notice of idle talk. Let there be no coolness between ye on that account.'

Richard, however, remained fixed in his determination to avoid Littlecomb for the future, and in spite of his uncle's protests adhered to his resolution. On the following Sunday he was somewhat discomposed to find Rosalie's eyes straying towards him once or twice as he knelt on the opposite side of the church, and it seemed to him that they wore a questioning, pleading expression.

His purpose, however, remained unshaken, and immediately after the early dinner he went out without saying anything to his uncle, and could not be found when the hour came for their weekly pilgrimage to Littlecomb. After waiting some time, and vainly

bellowing his name, the farmer was obliged to go without him.

Richard was in a very taciturn mode at the evening meal, and his uncle's announcement that Mrs. F. had inquired why he had not come and remarked that she saw nothing of him nowadays, did not render him more inclined for conversation. After supper, too, instead of smoking quietly, he sat fidgeting in his chair for a few minutes, and then, rising hastily, fell to pacing about the room.

'You seem mortal onaisy this evening,' remarked the farmer, after these perambulations had continued some time. 'Sit down, and light up like a decent Christian.'

He pushed forward a chair invitingly with his foot, and Richard took it and drew his pipe from his pocket.

Ugh! How hot and stuffy it was in this kitchen, where, in spite of the warm weather, a fire was blazing! The windows had not been opened all day, he felt sure; the odour of their recent repast still lingered in the air, mingled with the fumes of the particularly rank pipe which his uncle was then enjoying. He thought of the cool twilight without, of the downs with the fresh breeze blowing across them, of the path beside the hedge

that led to Littlecomb, of the garden there — the garden where the thrush was singing, and where the roses and syringa were in full bloom. Ah, he could picture to himself the syringa with its white blossoms shining like pale lamps amid the dusky boughs. The garden still, and sweet, and dewy — where *she* was wandering at this hour!

'Light up, man,' said Isaac, pointing to Richard's pipe.

His nephew obeyed, but held it absently between his fingers.

Isaac poked the blazing logs with his foot and bent forward, extending his hands to the glow; his big red face looked unnaturally large through the surrounding haze of smoke. Richard half rose from his chair, and then sank back again. Outside, came the tantalising thought again, outside — a few paces away, were the downs and the lonely path through the fields, and then the garden.

The farmer was slowly nodding in the comfortable radiance. Richard's unused pipe had gone out. *The garden! The garden!*

Suddenly he rose from his chair, strode across the room, flung open the door, and was gone before his uncle had time to do more than turn his head.

CHAPTER VIII

Away! the moor is dark beneath the moon,
Rapid clouds have drunk the last pale beam of even:
Away! the gathering winds will call the darkness soon,
And profoundest midnight shroud the serene lights of heaven.
Pause not! The time is past! Every voice cries, away!

SHELLEY.

ONCE outside, Richard flew along as though pursued by a thousand demons; here were the downs, with their delicious tart air — but he raced across them without pausing to inhale it; now to swing over the hedge and to cover the ground that still lay between him and the garden. The garden and her! His heart was thumping loudly against his ribs; a sound as of a rushing sea was in his ears. On, on! there were the lights twinkling from under the dark eaves — there was the gate set in the high wall. How it shook beneath his violent hand as he flung it open! He stood still at last, hardly breathing in his suspense. Was she there? All was still save for the rustling of the boughs and the faint warbling of the birds — more than one was celebrating evensong to-night.

What if she should not be there! He walked on, slowly and unsteadily now, and presently there was a movement amid the greenery close at hand. Out of a little arbour set amid the shrubs a figure came gliding forth to meet him. She paused two paces away from him and her hands fell by her sides.

'It is you?' she said, almost in a whisper.

'Yes, it is I.'

They stood facing each other in unbroken silence for a full minute, and then she asked, still in that breathless whisper:

'Why did you come?'

'Because I could not keep away.'

She turned and began slowly to pace down the path between the roses. Waves of perfume were wafted to their nostrils from the syringa blossom. Yes, yonder stood the bush just as he had pictured to himself. The remembrance suddenly flashed across Richard as he walked beside her that these shrubs were sometimes called 'Mock Orange Trees.' *Mock Orange Trees! Mock Orange Blossom!* — he must not pursue that thought further.

'I kept away for four days,' he said suddenly. 'I tried to keep away to-day.'

After a long pause she faltered:

'I was wondering why you did not come.'

He made no answer, and they walked in silence till the end of the path was reached, and then she said, still falteringly:

'I don't think you ought to have come now.'

'I know I ought not!'

They turned and began to retrace their steps, but when about mid-way up the garden she came to a standstill and looked him full in the face.

'Go now,' she said. 'Go! You must not stay here any longer.'

Even in the dim light he could see that she was pale and that her figure wavered; but he gazed at her as though without realising the sense of her words.

'Will you not leave me,' she entreated, 'when I ask you?'

He stood looking at her stupidly for a moment or two longer; then the meaning of her request seemed to reach his understanding.

'I will go,' he said hoarsely, 'if you will give me those flowers in your hand.'

'How foolish you are!' she cried. 'There, yes, take them, and for Heaven's sake go!'

She thrust them towards him, and he took them from her hand — a cluster of roses, moist and sweet. Instead of fulfilling his promise, however, he made a step closer to her.

'Will you put them in my coat?' he asked. His eyes in his haggard face seemed to burn.

'No,' said Rosalie, drawing back.

The movement and the icy tone that accompanied it recalled him to himself. He, too, drew back, hesitated, and then, throwing the flowers on the ground with a passionate gesture, departed. Back again through the gate, across the yard, under the lea of the hedge, over the downs.

Here was home; there was the warm light of the fire by which his uncle sat. Now the door was open, and he stood once more in his presence; now, he, Richard, would be forced to look him in the face.

For a moment he stood with the door-handle in his hand, and then, as the old man turned to smile inquiringly upon him, he suddenly wheeled and fled.

'I can't,' he cried, as he mounted the stairs. 'I can't!'

Isaac stared at the closed door for some moments as though expecting it to open again, then, slowly turning back to the fire, listened.

In the room overhead hasty steps were walking up and down.

'He be gone to fetch summat, very like,'

remarked the farmer as he restored his pipe to his mouth. But after smoking and listening a little longer, and marking that the pacing to and fro continued without intermission, he jerked his thumb upwards, nodded, and said, 'He bain't a-comin' back.' Then, after pausing a moment to ruminate over this circumstance, he made up his mind to the inevitable, tapped his pipe upon the hob, extinguished the lamp, and went upstairs to bed.

And long after he was sunk in dreamless slumbers those hasty footsteps might have been heard in the adjoining room, pacing up and down, up and down, like the restless tread of a caged beast.

Richard was not the only one who spent an unquiet night. Rosalie, too, could find no rest for her aching heart. After some hours of feverish tossing she rose, dressed in the dim grey light that was just stealing over the world, and seated herself by the open window. She could meditate here without risk of being disturbed, for the sun would not rise for an hour and more; and even the earliest of her men would not appear until some time after dawn.

With her chin resting on her hand, she

hearkened vaguely to the succession of sounds which betokened the awakening of Nature. The cock had crowed long before she had left her uneasy pillow; the young sparrows had been chirping while she had clothed her weary frame; but now the cuckoo's note was sounding faintly from a neighbouring copse, and the starlings were chattering in their nests on the ivied wall. The grey veil was being gradually withdrawn from the face of the earth, but even yet familiar objects were only half revealed, and the most well-known had a strange and unreal look.

The first sunbeam had not yet struck across the sky when Rosalie, whose eyes had been absently fixed upon the irregular line of hedge which marked the approach to the barton, saw a dark object moving slowly along it, and presently into the open space before her gate there stepped the figure of a man. She knew what man it was even before he had vaulted the locked gate and taken up his stand beneath her window. She would have given worlds to close this window and hasten out of sight, but a spell seemed to be laid upon her, and she could neither move nor speak, only gaze downward with dilated frightened eyes.

'You are there?' said Richard, looking up

with a face as drawn and white as her own. 'Thank God! I wanted to see you before I go. I wanted to say Good-bye.'

The power of speech returned to her, and she leaned forth impulsively with a faint cry. 'Going! You are going?'

'Yes, I am going. Is it not the only thing I can do? Do you think I can bear to sit at his table and take his pay, and know that I am a traitor to him in my heart?'

Rosalie did not speak; but Richard, gazing upwards, saw the clasp of her hands tighten, as they rested on the sill, till the nails and knuckles showed white.

He went on passionately: 'Every word he says to me stabs me. Every time I look at his honest, unsuspicious face I feel — surely you must know what I feel! I 'm not quite a brute yet! And later, when you are his wife — do you think it would be possible for me to go on living within a stone's throw — to see you every day — to keep up the farce of friendship? What do you think I am made of?'

Her face was set like marble; only the eyes moved. After a long pause she whispered:

'Will you — ever come back?'

'Who knows?' he answered with a harsh

laugh. 'Some time perhaps — when I am quite old — when I can no longer feel.'

She put her hand before her eyes, and then let it drop. Richard saw the irrepressible anguish in them, and his face changed. He threw up his arms suddenly with a kind of a sob:

'I will not go — if you tell me to stay!'

For a moment longer the agonised eyes looked down into his, and he thought he saw her waver; but it was only for a moment. Her lips moved, at first without emitting any sound, but presently mastering herself, she said firmly:

'No, I tell you to go — it is right for you to go.'

'Good-bye,' said Richard hoarsely.

'Good-bye,' faltered Rosalie; and then there came a great sob: 'God bless you!'

He turned as if to leave her, but wheeling round, looked back.

'Am I to have nothing? Am I to be sent away without so much as a clasp of the hand?'

She had vanished from the window, and for a moment he stood holding his breath; would she come down to him — would she meet him at the door?

But within all was silent.

'She will not come,' he said to himself; and once more went on his way, staggering blindly forward, with his head sunk upon his breast.

Had he looked back again he might have seen her creep to the window and kneel by it, straining her eyes through streaming tears.

Poor Rosalie! Poor Beauty! Did she wake at last only to look upon the vanishing form of her Prince?

. . . . .

Later in the day Isaac Sharpe came to Littlecomb in great perturbation of mind. He found Rosalie lying on the couch in the parlour, the blind being drawn down — she had a headache, she said.

'Dear heart alive!' said Isaac, sitting down, a hand on either knee. 'Everything d' seem to be goin' wrong this day! Here 's my nevvy gone off wi' himself!'

'Gone?' echoed Rosalie, faintly, turning her face to the wall.

''Ees, took himself off this morning wi'out a word to anyone, and left this here bit of a note for to explain. I bain't much of a hand at letter readin', but Bithey did read it for me, and he does n't seem to give no excuse at

all, except that he were feelin' restless. He says he al'ays told me he were a rover, and could n't settle down, and now the travellin' fit have come on him and he felt he must be off. And he thanks me very handsome, and he tells me he don't know where he be a-goin' to yet, but when he does he 'll write and let me know where to send his luggage. And that 's all.'

'That 's all,' repeated Rosalie, looking at the kind, troubled old face with a bewildered stare. That was all, of course; and she had known it before. She had with her own eyes watched Richard's departing figure until it had disappeared from sight. She had known quite well that he would never return; she had even told him to go, agreed with him that it was the right and honourable thing to do — the only thing to do. Ever since the morning she had been telling herself so over and over again; yet none the less the farmer's words fell like a knell upon her heart.

'You do look bad, to be sure — I am sorry your head be so bad. Lard! Lard, what a world this be! I 'm that upset I don't know whether I 'm on my head or my heels.'

The quaver in his voice smote Rosalie. She must make an effort to overcome her

selfish grief; above all, to conquer that mad spirit of rebellion which every now and then rose rampant within her. This good man had need of her sympathy; should she not give it all the more willingly that there was so large an element of remorse mingled with her misery? She sat up and looked affectionately towards him:

'I 'm very, very sorry for you,' she said.

'T was so sudden, ye see,' pursued Isaac dolefully. 'He never so much as said a word to I — never so much as hinted as he war n't satisfied. I mid ha' seen that the restless fit were a-comin' on if I had n't ha' been sich a sammy. Restless! He were that restless last night, he were more like a dog at a fair as had lost his master nor a reasonable human being! It was up and down, and in and out the whole blessed evening. Ah, I be terrible upset; I be oncommon fond o' Richard, d' ye see. Always was from the time he were a little 'un. I was oncommon fond o' his mother afore him; she were the only woman I ever could put up wi'—present company excepted.'

As Isaac ducked his head towards her with a melancholy attempt at jocularity, Rosalie's heart sank lower still; she turned away hastily that he might not see her face. At an

earlier period she might have been gratified by the knowledge that she was one of the few women in the world whom Isaac Sharpe could 'put up with'—phrases of the kind were his nearest approach to ardour, and indicated, as she knew, a considerable amount of solid attachment; but the passionate tones of Richard's voice had rung too recently in her ear—the look in his eyes was too fresh in her memory. Ah, what had she not seen in those eyes!

''Ees,' went on her unconscious future husband, ''ees, I'll be like to miss 'en; him and me was the best of friends—and that's not all. His leaving me like this be terrible ill-convenient just now—'t is the busy time of year, d'ye see—haymaking time—every pair o' hands is wanted. Richard did very near the work o' two men; and he must go trapesing off wi' hisself, giving me no time at all to find somebody to take his place.'

There was a distinct sense of injury in his tone now.

'I am sure he never thought of that,' cried Rosalie, quickly and resentfully. How could Isaac find it in his heart to think of such things in the face of the overwhelming fact that Richard was gone!

'Ah, sure he did n't,' agreed Isaac. ''T is a very bad job! A very bad job indeed; but I suppose there bain't nothing to be done.'

Rosalie agreed with a sigh. It was too true; there was nothing to be done.

CHAPTER IX

L'absence est à l'amour
Ce qu'est au feu le vent;
Il éteint le petit,
Mais il allume le grand.

SEVERAL days passed, and Richard made no sign. Rosalie went about looking like the ghost of herself. It was known that she was suffering from a very severe attack of neuralgia, which, oddly enough, had first seized her on the very day of Richard Marshall's sudden departure.

Some guileless people believed in the neuralgia — poor Mrs. Fiander did look so very bad, and a body could n't make believe to be so pale. Others, among whom was Mrs. Belbin, folded their arms and assumed a knowing air. 'T was likely enough, averred this matron, for folks to look pale as had reason to. Mrs. Fiander's conscience was very likely a-troublin' o' she. She was a terrible one for carryin' on wi' young men — a-leadin' of them on, and then a-sendin' them

off wi'out no reason. Her Sam could say somethin' if he 'd a mind — her Sam did know more than he did like to talk about. Others, again, were of opinion that Mrs. Fiander was just wasting away for love of Mr. Sharpe's nephew, and that that young man had gone of his own accord, and had not been dismissed by the widow. 'T was n't very likely, said these sages, that Richard Marshall, who had his own way to make in the world, and who was known to have great expectations from his uncle, would wish to have any unpleasantness with him. In response to the suggestion that the young man would n't be a-doin' so very bad for hisself if he and Widow Fiander made a match of it, they returned conclusively that it was quite unpossible for him and Widow Fiander to make a match of it, since her banns were to be given out almost immediately with Farmer Sharpe. Somebody had up and axed Mrs. Fiander when the wedding was to be, and she had answered that the day was not yet fixed, but that the wedding was to take place as agreed at the end of July.

Isaac heard none of these rumours, but he too wandered about with an unusually lengthy and gloomy face.

One day, however, Rosalie, looking out from the darkened room where she was sitting, saw him hastening towards her house with every appearance of excitement, waving a piece of paper in his hand.

In a moment she stood on the threshold.

'You have heard from Richard?' she cried eagerly. 'You have had a letter?'

'Nay, my dear, I have n't had no letter,' panted Isaac, as soon as he was near enough. 'I 've had a graft.'

'You have had what?' inquired Rosalie.

'I have had a graft, my dear, a tele-graft — in one of them nasty-lookin' yeller wrappers as al'ays seems to bring bad news.'

'I hope it has n't brought bad news this time,' said she tremulously, as they went into the house together.

'Nay, I hope not,' said the farmer doubtfully. 'It does n't say much, d'ye see — not much one way or t' other.'

Smoothing out the paper, he handed it to her upside down.

Rosalie reversed it, and read the brief message:

'Send luggage as soon as possible Lime Street Station, Liverpool, to be called for. — Richard.'

'Liverpool! Then he must intend to go to America again!'

Isaac flushed, and his jaw dropped.

'Now, Mrs. F., I do call that a-jumpin' to conclusions,' he said presently, quite testily for him. 'You have n't no earthly reason for sayin' sich a thing. Is it likely my nevvy 'ud go off to 'Merica again when he 's only just a-comed back? Did n't he say he was a-longin' and a-longin' to be back to the old country——'

'I know,' interrupted Rosalie quickly; 'but for all that I 'm sure he means to return to America now. He told me he landed at Liverpool, and, depend upon it, he intends to start from there again. Yes, yes, I 'm quite sure of it. He did not rest, you see, until he had put the length of the country between us, and now he means to go further still — perhaps when he is at the other side of the world he will be contented.'

She spoke with irrepressible bitterness, but Isaac did not notice it.

'If that 's your opinion, Mrs. F.,' he said, 'we 'd best lose no time in carryin' out my little plan. I 've got a plan, d' ye see,' he added, with modest triumph. 'Ah, it comed to me all of a sudden. We 'll write to him, Mrs. F.'

'But what would be the use of writing?' said Rosalie. 'We cannot force him to come back against his will.'

'Nay, we can't force him, but I think 't is only some notion the chap 's got in his head. He seemed quite settled till last week, and maybe the rovin' fit will ha' wore off a bit by now. He 's gone all the way to Liverpool, d' ye see — that ought to ha' let off a bit o' steam. Maybe, if we wrote him a letter and just axed him straight out, he might change his mind. We can send a letter with his luggage — 't won't be too late so long as he has n't left the country; and he can't leave the country wi'out his luggage, d' ye see? We can but try.'

'Of course — you can try,' said Rosalie, pressing her hand to her head with a bewildered air.

'So, I were thinkin', Mrs. F., if ye 'd jist set down and drop a line to 'en for me — that 's to say, if your head bain't a-troublin' you too much ——'

He was looking at her pleadingly, misunderstanding the expression of her face.

'Oh, never mind about my head. I 'm only wondering — I 'm only thinking. Must the letter go to-day?'

'Well ye see, Richard did ax most perticlar

for his traps to be sent off *at* once,' replied the farmer, his eyes round with anxiety; 'and if we don't send the letter at the same time we mid miss him.'

'Bithey used always to write to him for you, didn't she?' said Rosalie, catching at the last straw. 'Perhaps it would have more effect if she wrote.'

'Nay now, my dear, if ye 'd be so obligin', I 'd take it very kind o' you to do it. It d' take Bithey very near three days to write a letter — I 'd be very much obliged to 'ee, my dear,' he repeated persuasively.

Thus adjured she had no resource but to comply, and with a beating heart and throbbing brain she set about her preparations. Going to the window, she drew up the blind a little way, and then, collecting pen, ink, and paper, sat down opposite Isaac at the table. When she had thus inaugurated proceedings Isaac might have been observed to gather himself up, concentrating, as it were, all his forces in preparation to the effort of composition.

Having dipped her pen in the ink, Rosalie looked inquiringly at him.

'How do you wish me to begin?' she said.

'Bithey do al'ays start off wi' "My dear Nevvy,"' responded Isaac in a husky tone, as

though he were speaking from beneath a blanket, which evidently resulted from the mighty constraint he was putting upon himself.

'*My dear Nephew*,' wrote Rosalie, and then she raised her eyes again.

The farmer cleared his throat, drew a long breath, and continued slowly, and with apparently immense difficulty:

'*Your uncle Isaac do say* ——'

'Say,' repeated Rosalie, when she had written the last word.

Isaac, crimson in the face, was absorbed in the mental struggle, but presently perceived with a start that her pen had stopped moving.

'Have 'ee got *Say?* Well, *Your uncle Isaac do say — as I hope you'll change your mind* ——'

'Had n't I better put *he* hopes?' said the secretary.

The farmer came out of his brown study, and looked up at her inquiringly:

'Who 's he?'

'Why you, of course. If I say, "Your uncle Isaac," I ought to go on in the same way, "He says." If I say "I" it will look as if I were speaking of myself — as if it were *I* who wished he would change his mind.'

'Well, and don't 'ee wish it?' asked Isaac sharply, but reproachfully too.

Rosalie bent her head over the paper, and answered hurriedly:

'I? Oh, of course, of course; but it would not do for me to tell him so — it would be too much of a liberty.'

'Lard, no, my dear. Richard would n't think it such. But there, I be dathered with so much talk — you must n't cut in again, Mrs. F. — 't is terrible hard work writin' letters, and if ye go for to speak to I in the middle I 'll be all mixed up. Let me tell 'ee my own way, d' ye see? — Richard knows my ways, and he 'll understand fast enough. Now, let me see: — "*Your uncle Isaac wishes for to say as I hope ye 'll change your mind and come back. Mrs. F. is a-writin' this for I, and she wishes for to say 't is Uncle Isaac as wants 'ee back*" — that 'll make it all right, d' ye see?' he continued, dropping the high unnatural tone which seemed essential to dictation, and adopting a confidential one — 'now he can't go for to make no mistakes. Have 'ee wrote that?'

'No. — Oh, don't make me write that, Mr. Sharpe — I don't want him to think me unkind.'

Isaac clicked his tongue in desperation.

'Lard ha' mercy!' he ejaculated, 'this here letter 'ull never get wrote. Now, my dear, jist put down what I d' tell 'ee — and don't flurry me. When I do get flurried I can't for the life o' me think o' nothin'. Jist be a-puttin' o' that down, and I 'll go on thinkin', d' ye see. It 'll come right — ye 'll find it 'll come right.'

Rosalie reluctantly set down the required sentence, and found at its conclusion that Isaac had already inflated himself in preparation for a further effort.

'*Mrs. F. d' wish 'ee to come back too, as is nat'ral, but she thinks it more becomin' not to say so.*'

He fixed his eyes sternly upon her as he enunciated this statement, and in sheer desperation Rosalie set it down.

'Now ye have n't nothing to complain of, I don't think,' he remarked triumphantly. 'Now we can get on. Well — what next?'

After deep reflection the following words came forth:

''*T is most onconvenient for 'ee to be a-leavin' me at such short notice. I — wish — 'ee — most — pertic'lar — to — come — back — to-week. We be a-goin' to cut the church meadow, and*

every hand be wanted. I do feel a bit hurt in my feelin's' — Here Isaac paused to brush his coat sleeve across his eyes, and continued brokenly — '*hurt in my feelin's to think as you have a-left your old uncle like that.* 'T war n't well done o' him,' he muttered, parenthetically, 'nay, I can't say as it were well done o' Richard.'

He wiped his eyes again, sniffed, drew an immense breath, and started off afresh:

'*Like that. I do think ye mid ha' said a word, but I will not find fault no more, but jist ax ye to come straight back — an' all will be forgive and forgot.* Now I think, Mrs. F., we mid finish, ye mid jist write my name and I 'll put my mark to it.'

He heaved a deep sigh of relief, wiped his brow, and sat gazing at her as she appended his signature to the page.

'That be my name, be it?' he inquired. 'It do look very pretty wrote out so nice and small. 'Ees, I can see as this here 's my name. *I — S — A —*. You put *A* twice, Mrs. F.'

'Yes, it should be written twice.'

'Ah,' said the farmer, gazing at the page doubtfully. 'Bi-they now do only put it once — it be a matter o' taste, I suppose. Well, now, I 'll put my mark.'

He ground his pen slowly into the paper, horizontally and perpendicularly, and remained gazing at it with a certain modest pride.

'There, shut 'en up now, and write his name outside.'

Rosalie obeyed, and held out the document towards Isaac, but as he was about to take it she drew it back, a deep flush overspreading her face. After a moment's hesitation, however, she again tendered it to him.

'There — take it,' she said, with a note of sharpness in her voice which would have struck a more acute observer than Isaac; but he duly pocketed it without noticing that anything was amiss.

Left to herself she sat for a moment or two in deep thought, her chin propped upon her hands; then suddenly rising, rushed out into the yard.

'Mr. Sharpe!' she called. 'Isaac!'

But the farmer's broad back was already vanishing down the lane. Evidently her voice failed to reach him as he did not turn his head. Rosalie stood looking after him, without making further attempts to attract his attention, and then slowly returned to the house. Why should she call him back, after all — what need was there for her thus to dis-

turb herself? Could she help writing the letter exactly as he wished; and how foolish were the qualms of conscience which the remembrance of certain phrases in it evoked. It was his letter, not hers: it was he who had insisted on stating that she wished Richard to return — she had never authorised him to do so. If Richard did come back she could not be blamed for it. If he did come back!

Again supporting her throbbing head with her hands, she tried to reason with herself, but the turmoil in heart and brain for a time forbade any consecutive train of ideas. During the long blank days which had passed since Richard's departure, and often in the course of the weary, restless nights, this thought had constantly recurred to her with a never-failing stab: — *He has gone — he will never come back!*

And now, if he did come back — if he came back even for a little while! If she might just see him again, if it were only to be once or twice! At the mere suggestion she was conscious of a lifting of the load which had been crushing her. If he were made to know, through no fault of hers but rather against her will, that she did wish him

to return — she who had let him go forth without a word to stay him — if he even guessed that she longed to see him — oh, it would be sweet to think he knew, that he would henceforth judge her less harshly, that he would realise how hard had been her struggle!

She raised her head, her lips parted in a smile, her eyes dreamily gazing at the strip of sunlit green outside her window. There he had stood; thence he had turned away so mournfully, and now he was to come back. *To come back!* Would he not read between the lines of the oddly composed missive — would not the very words have for him a deeper meaning than their guileless originator guessed at — would he not come flying to her side? In a few days — in little more than a few hours, perhaps, he would be with her; and then!

She gave a sudden gasp, and flung herself forward across the table. And then! In a moment the web of self-deception with which she had been endeavouring to cloak the situation was torn to shreds, and she saw the truth. A crisis was impending: it was folly to pretend that it would take her unawares, it was worse than folly to endeavour to shift the

responsibility to poor unsuspicious Isaac. If Richard returned the struggle would have to be gone through again: it would be even harder than before, for she would have lured him back after he had broken from her. If thus sorely tempted and wrongfully encouraged he were to speak those words which she had seen so often trembling on his lips, what answer could she make? Could she look him in the face and affect unconsciousness, or—what did she mean to do? Did she mean to keep her plighted troth as an honest woman should, or did she mean to cast aside, for good and all, truth, and honour, and self-respect, and jilt the man who had been her faithful friend?

'I want to do right,' said Rosalie, with another gasping sigh. 'I have never told a lie in my life; I won't tell one now; I won't act one either. If he comes back it will only be on false pretences; he must n't be allowed to come back.'

She lay still for a moment, her arms extended, a kind of tremor passing every now and then over her frame. Presently she said again, half aloud:

'I won't be deceitful; I won't break my word; but oh, how hard it is to do right! God help me.'

She straightened herself all at once, and pushed back the hair from her forehead; then, drawing the blotter towards her, wrote a hasty line on a sheet of paper—'Do not come back, I implore you. R. F.'—thrust it into an envelope, and directed it to Richard. With little convulsive sobs at intervals she went upstairs, bathed her swollen eyes, and put on her hat.

There was no one about the Down Farm when she approached it, but, on entering, she almost fell over a strapped portmanteau that had been placed just inside the doorway. As she recovered herself Bithey appeared at the kitchen door.

'I thought you was the carrier,' she remarked. 'Master did say as he'd sent for him to fetch that there box o' Richard Marshall's. 'T is to go to Liverpool to-day.'

'Is Mr. Sharpe in?' asked Rosalie falteringly. Somehow the sight of that portmanteau made her turn suddenly faint.

'Nay, he bain't. But I'm expectin' him back every minute. He be gone some time now, and he said he'd just catch the carrier. I had a hard job to get all packed and ready, but 't is done now.'

It was all packed, the straps fastened, the

lock made secure. Rosalie was too late after all; the important postscript which was to supplement the letter could not, as she intended, be slipped among Richard's effects. Her heart gave a sudden throb that was not altogether of pain. She had honestly tried, but fate willed otherwise.

'I don't think I'll wait,' she stammered, scarcely knowing what she said. 'I shall see Mr. Sharpe to-morrow, and I should only be in your way. I dare say you are busy.'

'Nay, not that busy now, ma'am. I'm just a-makin' a parcel of a big thick coat o' Richard's. 'T would n't go in the box nohow, and I'm tryin' to pack it in paper, but 't is that heavy it do slip out at one side so soon as I get t' other wrapped up.'

'Let me help you,' said Rosalie. 'Four hands are better than two.'

She had never seen Richard wear this coat, yet the mere sight of it — the mere consciousness that it was his caused a recurrence of that strange wave of faintness.

'We want a little bit more string, Bithey,' she said with the quaver in her voice which had been noticeable before.

'I think there's a little bit on the dresser shelf,' returned the old woman; and, dropping

her end of the parcel, she went across the kitchen.

This was Rosalie's chance. She was white to the very lips, but she did not flinch. With cold, trembling fingers, she hid away the note in the breast-pocket of the coat; he would be sure to find it there.

Bithey discovered nothing, and presently, the packet being secured, Rosalie betook herself homewards.

'I 've done it!' she said, pausing when she reached the solitude of the downs. 'Thank God! I 've done it! It will be all right now.'

But it was not surprising that in the midst of her self-congratulations on having so successfully barred herself out of Eden she should once more melt into tears.

CHAPTER X

> Had we never loved sae kindly,
> Had we never loved sae blindly,
> Never met, or never parted,
> We had ne'er been broken-hearted.
>
> BURNS.

THE cutting and making of Rosalie's hay had been proceeding briskly in the Church Meadow; the last swathes had fallen, and every available pair of hands had been called upon to assist in the work, for experienced weather-prophets had foretold gloomily that the actual 'fine spell' could not be expected to last.

Towards evening on the second day Farmer Sharpe stood alone in the centre of the field; mopped, for the hundredth time, his perspiring brow, and cast a contemplative look round.

'T was past seven o'clock; the men had gone home some time before, but he had remained to take a final survey of the scene of their labours.

'I don't think it's so very like to rain,' remarked Isaac, looking up at the sky, where, indeed, no trace of a cloud was to be seen.

'Nay, I don't hold wi' Job — 't will keep up for a bit yet. Mrs. F. 'ull ha' gone home by now, I should think — she 'd begin to find it a bit damp in the dell. The dew be falling very fast. Well, I 'll go home to my supper.'

He passed through the gate at the further end of the field, and had traversed more than half the distance which separated him from his home when the sound of heavy but rapid steps behind him made him halt and turn round.

Job Hunt, who had evidently been hastening in pursuit of him, paused too, his great red face wearing an appearance of unusual excitement, and his sly blue eyes positively goggling in his head. Owing to the unusual press of work, and the need for accomplishing it in a given time, Isaac had persuaded Rosalie to consent to his engaging this unwelcome addition to her forces, and she had agreed with a meekness that sufficiently indicated her spiritless condition. Job it was who had been most energetic in foretelling a coming storm, partly in order to render his services the more valuable, and partly because of a natural pleasure in predicting disaster to Mrs. Fiander's crops.

'Well,' said Isaac, gazing at him in astonishment.

'Have 'ee seen what be goin' on yonder, sir?' was Job's counter-query.

'What be a-goin' on where?' inquired the farmer.

'Why, there,' returned Hunt, with a significant jerk of the thumb in the direction of the Church Meadow.

'There bain't nothin' at all a-goin' on there,' returned his employer sternly. 'I be just come from there — the field's empty.'

'Nay, Mr. Sharpe,' returned Job, half closing one eye, and assuming a very knowing look. 'Nay, it bain't empty. Jist you step back and see. If you was to step up to the dell very cautious — I 'd advise 'ee to go very cautious, sir — you 'd maybe see summat as 'ud surprise 'ee. Jist you come along wi' I, Mr. Sharpe — I 'll show 'ee where to look, and I d' 'low ye 'll be astonished.'

Isaac surveyed him for half a minute or so without speaking, and then slowly jerked his thumb forwards.

'Cut away,' he said briefly. ''Ees, I don't mind if I do come, but I don't expect to see nothin' surprisin' at all.'

Job grinned derisively for all rejoinder, and led the way as requested; walking with exaggerated caution, and turning his malevolent

red-bearded face over his shoulder every now and then to make sure that Isaac was following. The latter shambled along at his usual pace and with a perfectly imperturbable face.

As they drew near the dell, a small cup-shaped pit surrounded by bushes at the upper end of the field, the sound of voices was distinctly audible — two voices, a man's and a woman's — speaking, however, so low that even when Isaac and his companion were close to the brink they could distinguish no words.

'Jist step for'ard, Mr. Sharpe, sir,' whispered Job excitedly. 'Jist look down through the bushes; I 'll bide here till ye come back.'

Sharpe paused for a moment or two, staring at him with evident displeasure, and then went forward. Presently his tall form towered above the bushes, and he looked down into the pit beneath.

After a long and steady gaze he returned to Job, took him by the shoulder, and propelled him to a safe distance from the tantalising spot. Job, when finally released, examined him with great curiosity; but the farmer's face, though a little redder than usual, in consequence probably of his recent exertions, was stolid as ever.

'Well?' he said in answer to the man's inquiring gaze.

'Well, sir, did 'ee see who was there?'

'Of course I did. Mrs. Fiander was there, where I left her, and my nevvy was there. He 've comed home, I see, as I axed him.'

'Oh,' said Job, much disappointed, 'I didn't know you were expectin' of him.'

'Didn't 'ee, Job? I've been expectin' of 'en all this week. I'm glad he's come.'

'It seems a bit queer as he should be in Mrs. Fiander's hayfield, instead o' goin' straight to your place,' urged Job almost plaintively. It was a little disappointing to find that his great discovery had been anticipated. 'When I did see 'en bi-cycling along the road I made sure he must be going straight to you, and then when I did see his bi-cycle leanin' agen' the hedge, I jist thought I'd see where he'd got to—and there he were in the dell.'

'And a very nat'ral place for 'en to be,' returned Isaac in his most matter-of-fact tone. 'I did tell 'en most pertic-lar we was cuttin' the Church Meadow, and when he saw Mrs. Fiander in the dell 't was most nat'ral he should go and speak to her. I don't see nothin' queer, Job Hunt.'

'He was a-holdin' o' both her hands when *I* see 'en,' muttered Job.

'Ah,' commented Isaac. 'Well, he'll be a-holdin' both mine soon. I be main glad he be come back. Now I 'm a-goin' home to my supper, and I think you 'd do well to go back to yours, Job. I 'll expect you early in the field to-morrow; so the sooner ye get back to look arter your own business the better. I would n't advise 'ee to go interfering wi' my nevvy. He bain't so very fond o' folks axin' questions or pryin' about. Ah, I 've known 'en take his fists to a man once as he thought too curious. 'T is the way wi' young chaps.'

He nodded, fixed his eyes impressively on Hunt, as though to make sure that the meaning of his words had penetrated to that somewhat dull-witted gentleman's consciousness, and finally rolled homewards, to all appearance placid as ever.

He had not proceeded very far before he paused, however, shook his head, and finally stood stock-still.

'Two hands,' said Farmer Sharpe reflectively. 'Two hands!'

. . . . . .

It now becomes necessary to ascertain what passed before Isaac Sharpe, looking down

through the willow-bushes, descried Richard Marshall in such close proximity to Mrs. Fiander.

Nothing certainly was farther from Rosalie's thoughts when she had taken refuge in that sheltered spot from the glare of the afternoon sun than the expectation of the advent of this companion. She had, in fact, quite decided that he was by this time out of the country, and had, indeed, made up her mind to erase his image definitely from her memory. Henceforward, as she frequently told herself, she must think only of Isaac — Isaac, who had always been her friend, who was so soon to be her husband. Her husband! — she must face the thought though she unconsciously shrank from it. Oh, would — would that this sweet cup of forbidden love had never been held to her lips! She had dashed it from her, but the taste of it remained and had taken all the savour out of her life. It had been to her a poisonous cup, containing as it did wine from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. '*You know very little of life*,' Richard had said to her once. Alas, alas! she knew now more than enough.

'Oh, Elias — poor Elias,' she groaned to herself sometimes, 'why did you die? If you

had lived I should have known nothing — I should have guessed at nothing. I might have gone down to my grave without knowing that there was any other love besides that which I gave you.'

As an antidote to the rebellious longing of which she was too often conscious, Rosalie had recourse to the panacea she had hitherto found unfailing in times of affliction: hard work. Since the writing of that letter to Richard, and the subsequent battle with herself, she had resumed her old energetic habits. Once more she rose with the dawn, once more she passed hours in toil no less arduous than that allotted to her servants. She avoided solitude as much as possible, and strove by every means in her power to tire herself out.

So tired was she, indeed, on this particular afternoon, that, having sought the friendly shade of the grassy nook already referred to, she acknowledged herself to be incapable of further effort. Even when the great heat had somewhat abated, and the retreating voices and heavy tread of her labourers as they trooped homewards warned her that it was growing late, she sat on, her hands clasping her knees, her eyes gazing vacantly on the ground, too weary even to think.

A footstep sounded in the neighbourhood of her retreat, but she did not raise her eyes: it was some straggler, probably, hastening to rejoin the others. She could hear the bushes rustling, as though brushed by a passing form, and kept very still; she wanted nobody to speak to her, nobody even to look at her. But now the step faltered, halted — there was a pause; and then rapid feet began to descend towards where she sat. She raised her eyes, first in surprise and a little irritation, then in incredulous wonder, then — oh, what was it that Richard saw in them?

In a moment he was bending over her and both her hands were clasped in his.

Was it that particular moment that Job Hunt chose to pursue his investigations, or did the acknowledged lovers remain thus longer than they knew? Rosalie could never afterwards tell, nor could Richard. They felt as if they were in a dream; time, place, circumstances, were alike forgotten; a vague undefined bliss — the intangible bliss of dreams — haunted them both, and in the minds of both lurked the same dread of awakening.

It was Rosalie who was first recalled to life. Her eyes, which had been fixed on Richard's face, dropped gradually to his hands; gazed

idly, first at those hands, then at her own which he was holding; then the idea gradually took shape in her mind — those were her hands, Rosalie Fiander's hands, that were lying in Richard's clasp; and they had no right to be there!

She snatched them away instantly, and the charm was broken.

'You have come back!' she cried. 'Why did you come back?'

'I came,' said he, 'because I received your letter.'

Her face was white with anguish; his, on the contrary, flushed, eager, triumphant.

'But did you not find the note which I put in your pocket?' she murmured, gazing at him with frightened eyes. 'I thought you would be sure to find it. The other was not — was not really mine. I had to write what he wanted.'

'I know,' he answered blithely. 'I could see it plainly enough. It was not that which brought me home. It was your own precious little note — the little line which laid bare your heart to me. I had already sailed before I found it, but we touched at Queenstown and I landed there and took the first boat home. I have travelled night and day since.'

She was shaking like a reed in the wind.

'But — I begged you not to come,' she whispered.

'You begged me not to come, sweet, and so I guessed, I knew — you betrayed your secret, my dear love, and I felt my own power.'

'No, no,' she gasped; 'you must not speak to me like this, Richard — I will not listen. You know quite well that I cannot listen. I belong to another man!'

But Richard bent nearer still, his face alight with the same inexplicable triumph — a triumph that was almost fierce.

'You belong to me,' he said; and his words were perhaps the more passionate because spoken so low. 'You have belonged to me from the first. Even from the moment when I saw you in the picture I said to myself ——'

'Oh, no,' pleaded Rosalie, in tones as passionate as his, but infinitely piteous. 'Do not say it, Richard — do not — do not put it into words!'

Her hand flew out involuntarily as though to stop his mouth: he caught it and kissed it though it fluttered in his grasp.

'Why should I not say it — why should I not be brave enough to put into words the thought which has been in both our minds so

often? When I saw your picture I fancied myself standing beside you, bending over you ——'

'Oh, hush, hush!'

She had withdrawn her hand, and was covering her face.

'I said to myself,' he persevered, his words coming brokenly because of his quick breathing. 'I said to myself, "If that woman lives she shall be my wife — I will search for her until I find her!" And then when I found you — I thought you were free.'

'But I was not free,' she interrupted, dropping her hands and looking up with eyes fierce and wild like those of a hunted animal. 'I am not free now, neither are you free. You are bound to him as much as I am — your duty stares you in the face ——'

'It is too late to talk of duty! I ought never to have seen you. Do you suppose there is anything which you can tell me that I have not told myself a hundred times? He is my uncle — yes! He has been my benefactor always — more than a father to me — yes, yes! He is the kindest, the most warm-hearted, the most guileless of men. It would never enter his honest, innocent mind to suspect me of trying to supplant him; in acting

as I do I am a traitor, a liar — vile, ungrateful, dishonourable, dishonest — Oh, there are no words strong enough, or black enough to paint me as I am! I know it and I agree to it; but I love you, Rosalie, and I will not give you up!'

Some of his words were scarcely audible as they came in gusts from his quivering lips; the veins on his forehead stood out; there was no mistaking the bitter contempt with which he stigmatised his own conduct, but there was even less possibility of misapprehending his deadly earnestness of purpose.

'I mean to have you,' he went on; 'I mean to let everything go — except you.'

She was so much taken aback at the suddenness of the onslaught, so confounded at the quickness with which he had forestalled all she had intended to urge, that she stood before him for a moment absolutely mute; trembling, moreover, with the growing consciousness of her own weakness, and at his confident assumption of mastery over her.

Meanwhile he, with his eyes fixed upon her face, read it like a book. His own suddenly changed.

'It is useless to struggle, love,' he said, speaking very gently and tenderly. 'We

have both done our best — we have tried to do right, but Fate has been too strong for us. We must just make up our minds to let ourselves go with the tide — and be happy.'

Rosalie was, as has been seen, very impressionable, very emotional — in a word, very womanly; but for all that there was at her heart's core the little kernel of strength which is to be found in the hearts of most good women — an instinctive sense of rectitude, the love of duty for duty's sake, even when the accomplishment of it involves great sacrifice. She looked Richard full in the face now.

'No,' she said; 'I will not take any happiness that has to be bought by doing wrong. I made my own choice and fixed my lot in life before I knew you, and now I will abide by it.'

The very severity of the struggle gave her courage, and Richard, all passion-swayed as he was, had in him a certain element of chivalrousness that responded to the effort she was making.

He was silent, and Rosalie, quick to perceive her advantage, went on eagerly:

'I ask you to leave me, Richard; I want you to go now. It is quite true that you

have a kind of power over me, and that if you'—her voice faltered for a moment, but she steadied it—'if you go on urging me and persuading me you will very likely make me give in in the end; but I ask you, *because* you love me, not to do this. We could not be really happy if—if we came together through being dishonourable and ungrateful. It is better to do right at all costs. As for me, I mean to keep my word to your uncle. I will try my best to make him a good wife and to forget you.'

'And have you thought,' returned he, with a bitterness which he could not control—'have you thought at all of what is to become of me? The whole thing is absurd,' he went on with increasing irritation. 'Do you think for a moment that my uncle could suffer a tithe of what I shall suffer? You know very well he is not capable of it. Besides——' He broke off.

'I know what you mean,' said Rosalie, colouring faintly. 'He would not have thought of marrying me if I had not first suggested it. But I did suggest it, and he is very fond of me now.'

'Fond!' echoed the young man scornfully.

'Yes, as fond as it is in his nature to be.

He has been faithful to me, and I will be faithful to him. I will do nothing that could pain or humiliate him. Some day you too will feel glad that you have not injured your benefactor.'

'Then what do you want me to do?' said Richard, still half sullenly, though she saw by his face that her words had struck home.

'I want you to go away now — go quite away as you intended — as fast as you can — before — before anything happens to make us change our minds.'

In the words, in her pleading eyes there was that same piteous confession of weakness which had before touched Richard, and which now roused afresh his most generous instincts.

'I will do what you wish,' he said. 'You are a good woman, Rosalie; I — will go.'

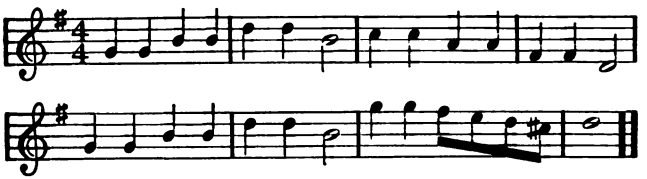
'To-night?'

'Yes; now!'

She glanced at him quickly, opened her mouth as if to speak, and then turned away without carrying out her intention.

Thus they parted, without another word or a clasp of the hands. Richard climbed up the bank and disappeared from view, and Rosalie remained standing where he had left her.

CHAPTER XI



WHEN Richard emerged from the shadowy hollow where he had left his mistress standing as if turned to stone, he found all the land about him bathed with the rosy glow of sunset. The long 'rollers' of newly-cut grass over which he stepped were touched here and there by arrows of light, and the twigs of the hedge towards which he made his way were outlined as by fire.

He saw none of these things, however; but when, climbing the low bank and passing through a gap in the hedge, he descended into the road, he was suddenly recalled to actualities by the unexpected appearance of a colossal figure which seemed to be mounting guard over his bicycle.

As Richard started back Farmer Sharpe rose from his seat on the bank, and stood

square and determined before him, the ruddy light playing upon his rugged face and shaggy hair and glorifying his white smock. One great hand still rested on the saddle of the bicycle, which it almost entirely covered. As Richard remained dumbly gazing at him, his fingers began to drum an impatient tune on its smooth surface.

The young man gazed desperately first at him and then at the bicycle, filled with an insane desire to possess himself of it and ride away at full speed. But whether because his courage failed him, or because nobler and more manly feelings gained the ascendency over this momentary cowardice, he did not put the design into execution.

After gazing steadily at his nephew for what seemed an interminable time, Isaac removed his hand from the bicycle and pointed in the direction of the little dell.

'I seed 'ee there, Richard,' he remarked in a sepulchral tone. 'I seed 'ee there with Mrs. F.'

Richard braced himself, and looked him full in the face, but made no rejoinder.

''Ees,' said the farmer, 'I seed ye both; and I've been a-waiting here for ye, Richard.'

Still silence. Richard, indeed, felt that it

would be useless to enter upon either explanation or apology.

Mr. Sharpe's hand crept back to the saddle and resumed its impatient tune; he planted his legs a little more widely apart, continuing the while to stare unwinkingly in his nephew's face.

When the tension had become almost unbearable, he spoke again.

'I thought I 'd wait for 'ee here,' he said. 'I thought ye 'd very likely have summat to say to me.'

The young man bit his lip and clenched his hands; he could scarcely brook the expectant look in those eyes.

'What am I to say, Uncle Isaac? I—what can I say? I 'm going away at once.'

The combined effect of sunshine and emotion had already intensified the farmer's usually healthy colour, but this announcement caused it to deepen to a positively alarming extent. For a moment he seemed in danger of suffocation; he raised his hand mechanically to the loose collar of his smock and clutched at it; his eyes seemed ready to start from their sockets, and, though he opened his mouth and rolled his head from side to side as though about to fulminate against his nephew, no words came.

'Don't,' cried Richard, much alarmed — 'don't be so angry, uncle — you really need n't be so much upset. I tell you I 'm going away at once — to-night.'

Farmer Sharpe sank down on the bank, sliding his legs out before him rigid as a pair of compasses; his head continued to roll threateningly, and his eyes to gaze fiercely at Richard, but it was some time before he could find voice.

'Ye can't go to-night,' he said at last, in husky, suffocating tones: 'there bain't no train to-night.'

'Not from Branston, I know; but I mean to ride to Wimborne, and catch the night train there.'

Somehow this catching of the night train at Wimborne seemed to be the culminating point of Richard's depravity. Isaac positively groaned aloud; the fierceness went out of his eyes, and to Richard's infinite distress they filled with tears.

'What more can I do?' he faltered, torn with remorse and grief as he bent over him.

'I did n't think it of 'ee, Richard — nay, if anybody had told me ye 'd go for to do such a thing I would n't ha' believed 'em. To go

off wi'out a word to I — me as has been a father to 'ee — nay, not so much as a word!'

He paused, choked with emotion, and fell to wiping his eyes and shaking his head disconsolately; while Richard, slowly straightening himself, stood looking down at him.

'When Job Hunt did call me, and did p'int out as you was standin' — you and Mrs. F.— hand in hand: both hands in both hands,' he added, correcting himself, 'I didn't let on to take no notice. I did send Job about his business, and I did say to myself, "I 'll wait," says I. "My nevvy 'ull tell me all about it jist now." And I did go and sit me down here. Says I, "I 'll not interfere; I 'll wait," I says; "Richard will out wi' it all to I — he 'll act straight," I says. "He 'll tell me."'

He spoke almost appealingly. Richard's face, which had turned from white to red, was now white again.

'I wanted to spare you, uncle,' he murmured at last, falteringly.

Isaac groaned, and shook his head; then drawing a long breath, and peering anxiously at his nephew, he whispered pleadingly:

'What was you a-sayin' to Mrs. F. when you was a-holdin' of her hands, Richard?'

'Oh,' groaned the other impatiently, 'there

are some things that can't be talked about! I should n't have held her hands — I scarcely knew that I was holding them. What does it matter now? We have said good-bye to each other for ever; we have made up our minds never to see each other again.'

Isaac's jaw dropped; he brought down his fist heavily on the bank beside him.

'Well,' he muttered under his breath, 'I 'm danged! I can't get no satisfaction. Not a word!'

'You know enough,' said Richard fiercely. 'Be content with what I tell you — I will never darken your doors again.'

Isaac brought down his fist once more on the bank, and then slowly hoisted himself on to his feet.

'If ye have n't naught to say to I, I 've summat to say to you,' he announced, speaking very slowly. 'I bain't a-goin' to let 'ee go off like that. 'T is my way to be straightfor'ard. I 'll speak my mind plain to 'ee this night, and I 'll speak my mind to Mrs. F. Where be Mrs. F.? Come along of I, Richard, and find her.'

He had squeezed through the gap in the hedge while still speaking, and Richard had no choice but to follow him. A few strides

brought them to the dell, and, looking down, they descried Rosalie standing in the same attitude as that in which Richard had left her.

'Mrs. Fiander,' called Isaac, bending over the brink, 'will 'ee oblige me by stepping up here? The sides be a bit steep, and I bain't so young as I were — I can't very well go down, but I 'd be obliged if you 'd step up. I 've summat to say to you and my nevvy here.'

Rosalie had started violently at the sound of his voice, and now obeyed his summons in silence; but she trembled so much, and the wet grass had become so slippery, that she stumbled often, and it was some time before she completed the ascent. Meanwhile both men stood watching her, motionless, and in silence. Once or twice she had raised her eyes towards the great white figure which awaited her on the brink, and it seemed to her that Isaac's face was grave and stern like the face of a judge. She did not dare once glance at Richard, but she felt, even without looking at him, that their secret was discovered.

The farmer backed a little away from the edge of the dell when Rosalie came forth, and stood looking from one to the other;

then he spoke very solemnly, and with some hesitation.

'Mrs. Fiander, as I was a-sayin' to Richard jist now, 't is best to be straightfor'ard — 'ees, 't is best to speak out, even when it be hard to speak out. I can't get no satisfaction from Richard — he did acshally tell I to my face as he had made up his mind to go straight off wi'out a single word to I. He comes wi'out a word and he goes wi'out a word! Now, Mrs. F., I did see you together jist now, and I did think as you 'd have summat to tell me.'

There was a long pause. Isaac looked once more from Rosalie's graceful, shrinking figure to the other culprit, who stood with bent head, awaiting the storm of reproach and vituperation.

'From the very first,' pursued Isaac, still in that solemn and somewhat stern tone, 'I did tell 'ee my mind plain, Mrs. Fiander. I did tell 'ee straight out, did n't I? as I had n't never fixed my thoughts on materimony. 'T was you as was set on it——'

'Oh, I know,' interrupted Rosalie. 'I know it too well. Do not throw it in my face now!'

'Throw it in your face, Mrs. F.! Who's a-throwing o' what in your face? All I do say is I did al'ays do my best for 'ee — don't

you go for to blame me, for blame I do not deserve.'

Both raised their heads and looked at him, astonished at the change of tone, for now the old man seemed to speak more in sorrow than in anger.

'I did al'ays do my best for 'ee. I did al'ays think and act as kind as I could, and you did never once think of I. 'Ees, I did never interfere,' he went on, more emphatically; 'I left ye both to yourselves — did n't I? I never comed in your way. But ye mid ha' given me a thought.'

The penitent heads drooped again. What need had they to be reminded how guileless he had been, how unsuspicious, how chivalrous in thought and deed!

''Ees,' went on Isaac, 'I did leave ye to yourselves — I did ax ye to make friends. Do you mind how often I axed ye to be friends?'

True indeed; only too true! They had taken a base advantage of his confidence; they had profited of the opportunities he had given them only to be more and more unfaithful to him in their hearts.

'I thought you 'd be different to what you do be,' he continued, with increasing severity.

'When Sam'el Cross did tell I as you 'd snap up Mrs. F., Richard, what did I say? Says I, "My nevvy bain't a snapper!" D'ye mind? I said the same thing to you. Well, I thought maybe you 'd say summat then — but not a word!'

'Uncle, I — it is n't fair to reproach me like this. I kept away from Littlecomb as long as I could; you know that.'

''Ees, I do know it, Richard — I know it very well; you would n't come with me when I did ax 'ee that Sunday. You would n't come along o' me to Littlecomb; nay, but you went out by yourself that night, and when you comed back ye would n't so much as sit down and smoke a pipe like an honest Christian; and next day you must get up and go off wi' yourself before 't were light. And what did I do then — what did I do, Richard, though you 'd gone off and left me wi'out so much as a line? I did n't give up hopes of 'ee yet. I went and wrote 'ee a letter and told 'ee to come back, and all 'ud be forgive and forgot. There now, and what do 'ee say to that?'

His face was working with emotion, his voice tremulous for all its strength. Never in his life, probably, had Isaac Sharpe put so

many words together, and every one of them came from his heart. To the young people it seemed as though all their struggles had been futile, their good desires vain, their great sacrifice useless: for all their days they would be branded with infamy. They had, indeed, stopped short of the breach of faith to which both had been so strongly tempted, but they had nevertheless violated trust.

'And even now,' said Isaac — 'even at the very last, when you were for cuttin' off wi'out no explanation, I did give 'ee one more chance — and you would n't take it.'

'What in Heaven's name do you want to say?' cried Richard, goaded to desperation. 'Do you want me to tell you to your face that I love the woman you are going to marry?'

'Nay now,' returned his uncle in an expostulatory tone, 'I would n't go so far as that. I bain't onreasonable. All I did ever think o' axin' ye was for you and Mrs. F. to see if ye could n't take to each other. That were my notion. Ye might ha' gived each other a fair trial — a fair trial!'

The young couple stared at him blankly, hardly believing their ears; then Richard cried out with a gasp:

'Rosalie, do you hear — do you understand? He *wanted* us to love each other!'

'Nay,' interrupted the farmer, in a tone that was at once dignified and explanatory, 'I did n't expect so much straight off — Love! No, no, not love — but ye mid ha' jist tried to fancy one another! Ye mid ha' had a bit o' consideration for me, I think. Ye knowed, both on ye, as materimony would n't come easy to I; and seein' as you did tell me plain, Richard, the very first night you come home, as you was on the look-out for a wife, why not Mrs. F. so well as another?'

It was Rosalie's turn to gasp now, and her face bloomed like a rose in the evening light; but neither she nor Richard spoke; both were so suddenly brought down from their heights of heroics that it was natural they should feel somewhat dizzy and confused.

'I 'm a man o' my word,' said Isaac, 'and if ye have made up your mind and fixed your ch'ice on I, Mrs. F., why' — drawing a deep breath — 'I 'll keep my promise, my dear. But if Richard 'ud do so well as me 't 'ud be a deal more convenient, d' ye see? It 'ud seem a bit queer to change my state at my time o' life, and to leave the old home where I was born and bred. And Richard,

he has a very good notion o' farmin', and he'd be willing to carry on the work in the old way, and to take advice from I, d' ye see? Ah, the notion did come to I soon arter he comed here. Thinks I to myself, I wonder if Richard 'ud do — 't 'ud be a deal more suitable, thinks I; and more satisfactory to all parties.'

Here Isaac was interrupted by a sudden burst of laughter from his nephew — laughter which was indeed the outlet of such an extraordinary mixture of emotions that they had nearly found vent in tears. The exquisite sense of relief, the unhoped-for joy stirred his very heart's depths; but, on the other hand, the humour of the situation struck him with almost equal force. After the overwhelming remorse, the bitter sense of shame which but a few moments ago had tortured them, to discover that their contemplated sacrifice had very nearly set at naught good old Isaac's dearest wish!

'Oh, uncle, uncle!' he cried as soon as the first ecstatic outburst of mirth had subsided, 'why did you not speak before?'

''T would n't ha' been very becomin' for me to speak,' returned the farmer, still with great dignity. 'I knowed my dooty to Mrs. F.,

and I were n't a-goin' to say nothin' as mid hurt her feelin's. But I did try and bring ye together, Richard; and I did try to give ye so many hints as I could. D' ye mind how often I did say what a dear woman Mrs. F. were, and what a good wife she 'd make? Ah, many a time I did. And d' ye mind how I used to tell 'ee it was bad to hurt a woman's feelin's? And you would n't take a bit o' pains to be friendly and pleasant wi' her! I did look for some return from 'ee, Richard, and I were disapp'inted. And I did expect at least as ye would tell me straight whether you could take to the notion or whether ye could n't. 'T was the least ye mid do, I think. I were that anxious, and that upset — I don't see as it 's any laughin' matter,' he continued with gathering wrath, for Rosalie's face was now dimpling all over with smiles and Richard's hilarity seemed to increase rather than diminish. 'Come, I 'll have a straight answer one way or t' other. Will ye give up this here stupid notion o' going out o' the country, Richard, and bide here and see if you and Mrs. F. can't make it up between ye? And you, Mrs. F., my dear, will 'ee jist think over this here matter, and see if Richard would n't do as well as me?'

Richard suddenly ceased laughing, and stepped to Rosalie's side.

'Will you, Rosalie?' he said, very gently and tenderly. 'Will you try to like me a little?'

And, without waiting for an answer, he took her hands and laid them softly about his own neck, and stooped and kissed her.

'Dear heart alive!' exclaimed Isaac, clapping his hands. 'That were n't sich a bad beginning, Richard, I will say! You bain't very slack once you do make a start.' He paused to laugh, long and loud. 'Well, I never!' he cried. 'Nay, Richard, ye don't do things by halves. Well, Mrs. F., my dear,' he added, more anxiously, seeing that Rosalie did not speak, 'what d'ye say?'

'I suppose,' returned Rosalie faintly, with her face half hidden on Richard's shoulder, 'I suppose I 'll have to try.'

'Do 'ee now, my dear,' cried Isaac, much relieved. 'Ye 'll find ye won't *re*-pent it. And ye 'll not lose nothing by it neither,' he added as an afterthought. 'Richard be jist the same as a son to I — he 'll have all as I 've a-got to leave when I be gone. I don't want for to seem unkind, but it 'ud be a very great comfort to me if ye could make up your mind to't.'

'Oh, I think,' murmured Rosalie, 'that I can make up my mind to it.'

'Well, then,' cried Isaac, chuckling and rubbing his hands, 'all's well as ends well! 'Ees, we may say that—all's well as ends well! We'll be the best o' friends as ever; but I do think as Richard 'ull be more suitable as a husband, my dear. Ye mid as well see Mrs. F. home now, Richard. I think I'll go back to my bit o' supper; 't will be cold enough by now, I reckon.'

With a nod and a broad smile he left them, and pursued his homeward way, pausing ever and anon to look backwards at the two lithe young figures which moved slowly along above the dark irregular line of hedge—the bent heads, very close together, outlined against the lambent evening sky. Once, after one of these backward glances, he began to chuckle.

'They've a-took to the notion nicely,' he said. ''Ees, I reckon they'll do!'

THE END

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